Beyond The Veil

Indian Women In The Raj

Pran Nevile

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Women in India have always been accorded pride of place in both religious and philosophical thought. They were capable of advanced learning in every branch of knowledge and enjoyed high status in society in Vedic times. This was followed by a long period when their status declined and they were relegated behind the veil.

The British authors have left behind fascinating descriptive accounts of Indian women, their customs and manners and mode of life during the Raj period. Many of them admire the Indian woman for her innate sense of modesty and sing paeans to her womanliness. As regards the visual record by British artists, the Western concept of beauty had its impact on their portrayal of Indian women.

In this well-researched attempt to look 'beyond the veil' of Indian woman, the author has delineated the beauty of Indian woman in such a sensitive manner that you can almost feel her delicate charm and be mesmerised by her electrifying presence. While stylishly portraying the pomp and pageantry of the performing artists, he does not overlook the anguish and pain of the traditional Indian woman, which she overcomes with sheer grit and fortitude. And at no point does he lose control over the narrative which provides a fascinating study of the phenomenon called woman.

Sumptuously illustrated with reproductions of the finest paintings and drawings obtained from collections all over the world, ***'Beyond the Veil'*** is the first scholarly work of its kind on the formidable subject of Indian woman.

Beyond The Veil

Indian Women In The Raj

Pran Nevile

Nevile Books
New Delhi

By the same author

Lahore–A Sentimental Journey

Love Stories from the Raj

Nautch Girls of India

Rare Glimpses of the Raj

Cover picture: Hinda, a generalised name for an Indian woman, presumably the favourite wife of the king of oudh by George Beechey, C 1830
Courtesy: The British Library, London

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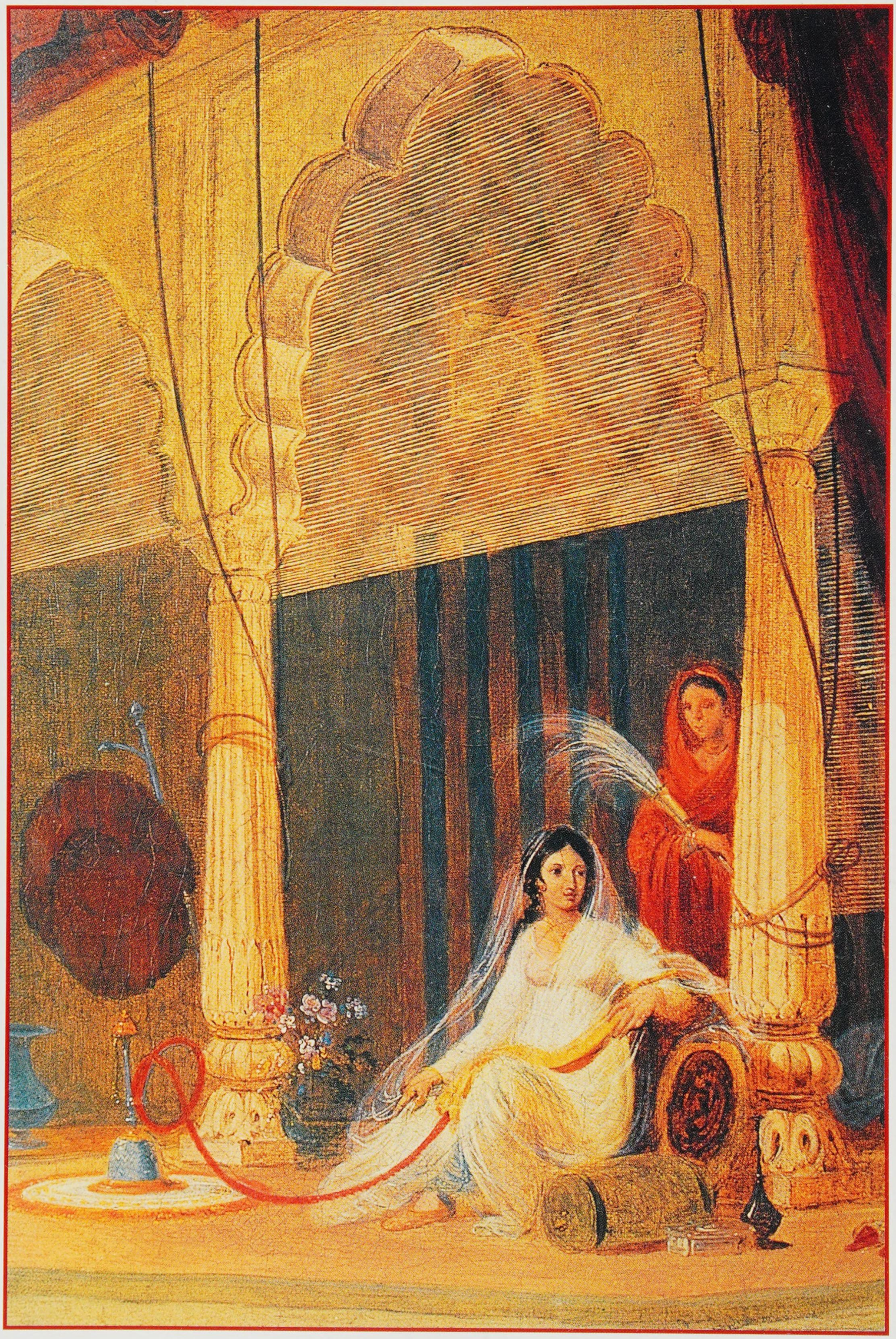
To
WOMEN OF INDIA

When one writes about woman, one must steep one's pen in the colours of the rainbow and scatter the dust from butterflies' wings on the page. With every movement of one's hand, a pearl must fall.

'Denis Diderot'
Sur les femmes.



1 *Zenana Scene. The bibi of an unknown protector by Thomas Daniell, c. 1804*

Contents

7
Preface and Acknowledgements

9
Introduction

27
Women of Aristocracy

47
Village Women

63
Bibis and Mistresses

83
Public Entertainers

101
Women at Work

113
Women in Marriage

127
Dress, Ornaments and Cosmetics

Select Bibliography

Picture Credits

Preface and Acknowledgements

This book has grown out of my wanderings in the fascinating field of Raj literature comprising journals, diaries and memoirs, which provides a rare insight into the Social and cultural scene in India during the 18th and 19th centuries. The British artists who came to India were the first to draw true to life pictures of the Indian panorama and its people. The study of this visual record of Indian people, particularly of women, has remained a neglected field so far. The present work is an attempt to fill this gap. It surveys briefly the early European impressions and observations about Indian women. The graphic illustrations of women of different classes have been assembled here for the first-time almost entirely from contemporary sources.

I would like to thank the directors and curators of art galleries and libraries in India and abroad who allowed me to study the visual and other material in their collections. Special thanks are due to the British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections, in particular Mrs. P. Kattenhorn and staff members in the Prints and Drawings Department, for providing me with slides of the required works from their holdings and also for according their permission to reproduce them in this book. I am greatly indebted to Dr. Deborrah Swallow, Chief Curator, Indian and South East Asian Department of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, for permitting me to use the pictures obtained from their holdings through courtesy and helpful assistance of Ms. Rosemary Crill. I would also like to express my grateful thanks to the Director and members of the staff of the Yale Center for British Art for all the courtesy and assistance I received from them.

Above all, I must express my gratitude to the External Publicity Division, Ministry of External Affairs, for supporting this project. Here I wish to thank Sunil Lal, Director (XP) and R.K. Singh, Under-Secretary (XP) for going through the manuscript and offering valuable suggestions. I am also grateful to the Indian Council for Cultural Relations for the travel grant which facilitated my research visit abroad.

My thanks are also due to Prof. Robert L. Hardgrave (Jr.) of University of Texas at Austin, who invited me to make an illustrated presentation on the theme of this book at his University. I am grateful to Professor Raj Seth and Bharat Bhushan for their editorial advice and comments, and also to Mrs. Madhu Tandon for going through the text and her constructive remarks.

The spellings of Indian words and place - names as used in the original texts and captions have been retained without alteration.

Pran Nevile
New Delhi

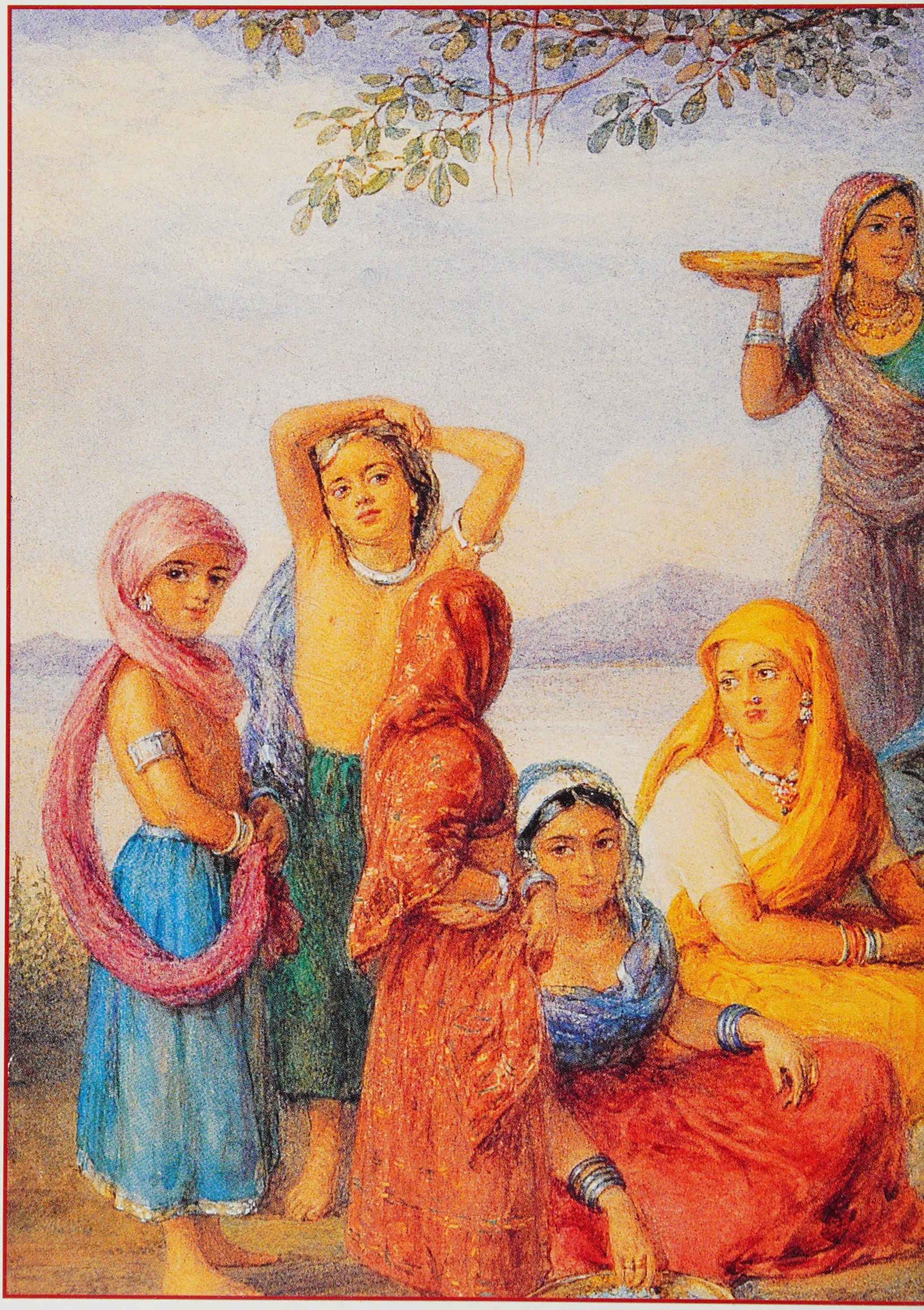
2 *A Brahmin woman of distinction in Guzerat by J. Forbes, 1781*

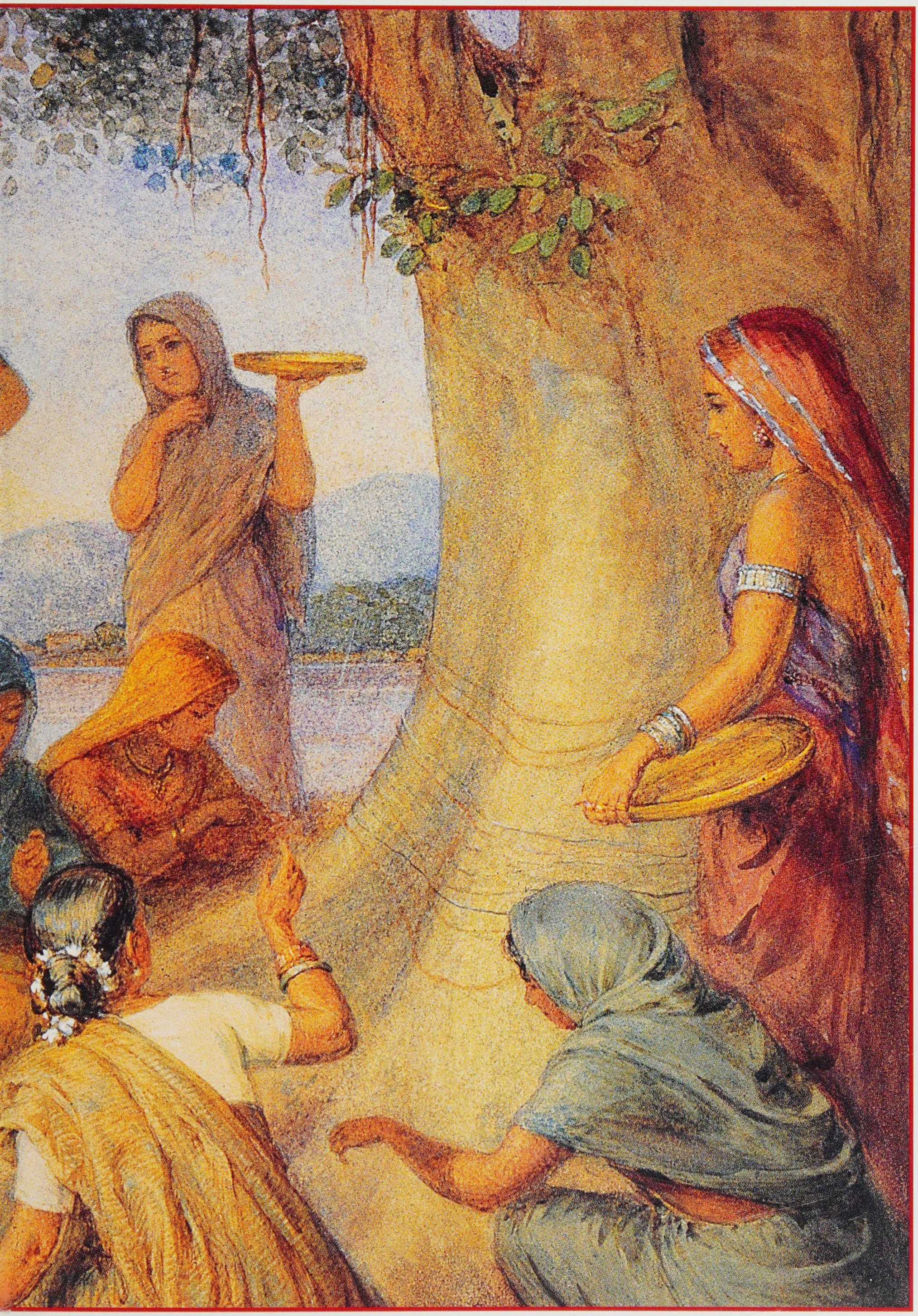
In the beginning, says a Hindu legend, Brahma created man. But when he came to the creation of woman, he found that he had no solid elements left. In this dilemma He fashioned her out of the odds and ends of creation. He took "the rotundity of the moon and the curves of creepers, and the clinging of tendrils, and the trembling of grass, and slenderness of the reed, and the boom of flowers, and lightness of leaves, and the tapering of the elephant's trunk, and the glances of deer, and the clustering of rows of bees, and the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, and the weeping of clouds, and the fickleness of the winds, and the timidity of the hare, and the vanity of the peacock, and the softness of the parrot's bosom, and the hardness of adamant, and the sweetness of honey, and the cruelty of the tiger, and the glow of fire, and the coldness of snow, and the chattering of jays, and the cooing of the *kokila* and the hypocrisy of the crane, and the fidelity of the *chakrawaka*": and compounding all these together, He made woman and gave her to man.

According to another Indian myth, woman was created out of the reflections of man gazing at himself in pools of water when he sought company for himself. "The woman as soon as she was made began to cry, and she said, 'Alas! Alas! I am and I am not'. Then said the creator: 'Thou foolish intermediate creature, thou art non-entity only when thou standst alone. But when thou are united to man thou art real in participation with his substance'. And thus apart from her husband a woman is non-entity, and a shadow without a substance; being nothing but the image of himself reflected in the mirror of illusion".

In spite of these myths, the highest place has been accorded to woman in Indian religious and philosophical thought. The hymns of Rigveda give a true picture of the status of women in ancient India. They were capable of high learning in every branch of knowledge and enjoyed the highest social status and participated in religious ceremonies. References in the Upanishads point out that women were also great philosophers and thinkers and took part in debates along with the men. The renowned Hindu lawgiver, Manu restricted woman's freedom in certain spheres in order to preserve the family structure. In spite of his famous dictum of her being subject to threefold obedience, as a girl to her parents, as a wife to her husband and last, if a widow, to her son, Manu also said, "where women are honoured there the gods are pleased, where they

3 *A Bengali woman in white sari descending the steps of a well by Fredrick W. A. De Fabeck, Calcutta, c. 1860*





4 *Indian women engaged in the ceremony of tree worship by William Carpenter, Rajputana, c. 1850*

are not honoured no sacred rites yield rewards". He also prescribes enlightened gentleness to women: They are not to be struck 'even with a flower'. The woman's status as a mother was glorified by Manu as he noted, 'The mother exceedth a thousand fathers in the right to reverence'.

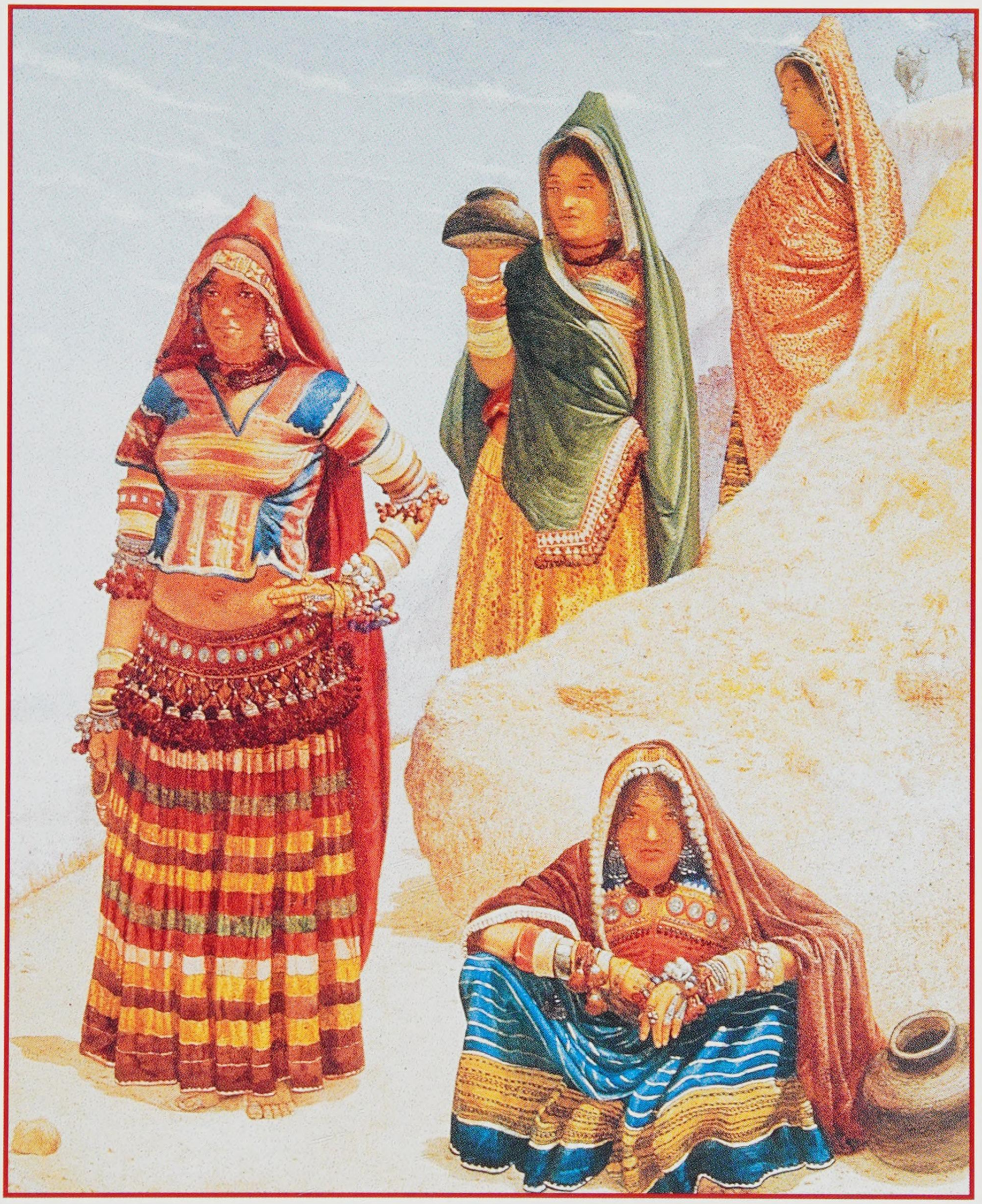
Buddhism kept up the Vedic traditions and women held honoured place in social life. They had access to learning and were even allowed to join the Bhikshuni-Sangha, the order of Nuns. Some of them took prominent part in the work of the early Buddhist reformation.

5 *Woman feeding a Faqir by Jacques Charles Bar, c. 1770*

After the advent of Islam in North India, there was a notable change in the position of women. Rigorous seclusion of women became the rule on account of the purdah system and lack of general security. In South India, however, women's position was not adversely affected in any way. Insofar as the rural India was considered, there was no purdah and women continued to enjoy their freedom as before.

The European travel writers of the 17th century were inclined to categorize Indian women according to their religious affiliation, Muslim or Hindu. John Fryer, surgeon to the East India Company (1672-81) observed that Muslims kept their wives away from public gaze. He writes about the boring respectability of the harem and fantasizes about the ungratified sexual appetite of harem women. Some others speak about strange religious practices of Hindu women which were considered more mysterious than the harem.

During the 18th and early 19th century, the British merchants and soldiers mingled freely with local people and either married or lived openly with Indian women. Some of these women addressed as bibis mixed with European friends of their masters and even gave sittings



6 *Four Banjari or Gypsy women on a mountain road by John Griffiths, c. 1870*

7 *Top: Scene at the well by John Gantz, c. 1827*
8 *Above : A group of women on the banks of Ganges who are variously bathing, washing clothes and carrying water from the river by William Daniell, c. 1795*

for their portraits by the British professional artists. Many paintings of the period that have survived show the intimacy that prevailed between the bibis and their patrons.

There is reference in literature to portraits of women but none has been preserved from ancient times. Images of women are, however, a recurring theme with the miniaturists of both the Mughal courts and the Rajput kingdoms. The aim of this art was not realistic portrayal of persons but to depict the essence of human joy, ecstasy and anguish. These pictures highlight the elusive nature of woman because of her seclusion from the public gaze and represent the exotic and almost unattainable beauty that the ideal woman was conceived to possess. The British artists who began arriving in India towards the end of the 18th century, drew their images of Indian women from life. They were not able to portray the ladies of aristocracy since they were kept in purdah. Apart from the charming portraits of the bibis, they painted common women at the wells, river ghats, festivals and at work. They also made live sketches of public entertainers, especially the dancing girls and courtesans.

Indian women have always been considered among the most beautiful in the world and their charms have been celebrated by poets and artists throughout the ages. The British portrayal of women was influenced by the western concept of beauty. William Hodges, the first British professional artist to visit India (1780), acknowledged that his portraits were based on ideas of classical beauty. James Forbes, a skilled amateur artist, also perceived the Indian women in terms of his image of the women of antiquity. British artists, both professional and amateur, have left behind numerous paintings and drawings of Indian women of all classes and these reveal their physical charm, typical costumes and jewellery.

There are fascinating accounts by British officials, scholars, travellers and missionaries about their impressions of Indian women. They speak about their physical beauty and charm, costumes and jewels and customs and manners. Their observations and perceptions of beauty appear to be subjective. Some use superlative terms for women of a particular region in India and proclaim them as incomparable in the country. Others describe them as remarkably beau-

tiful, both in features and figure despite their dark complexion, and go to the extent of asserting that no 'Englishwoman would venture to place the charms of her cramped figure in competition with the unshackled graces exhibited among these children of nature'. Bishop Heber of Calcutta (1820) was, in fact, greatly attracted by their skin colour and pointed out that the deep bronze tint was more naturally agreeable to the human eye than the fair skins of Europe. William Huggins in his *Sketches of India* (1824) also endorsed this view and wrote that "Indian woman's soft expression and delicate tournure of countenance made us forget the difference of complexion, or rather convince us, that complexion does not constitute the desirable in a woman".

Kashmiri women figure in quite a few accounts and are extolled for their charm and beauty. John Henry Grose (1760s) noted that the native princes would spare no effort or cost in procuring them for their harems. Richard Burton, the famous scholar, pays high compliments in colourful language to Sindhi women, while Mrs. Marianne Postans, wife of a company official, eloquently describes the remarkable beauty of Cutch ladies. About Bengali women, it is stated that "in figure and feature, she stands comparison with the finest races of the world". Nagar Women of Gujarat are praised for their grace and charm and particularly, their dark eyes 'in whose depth glows a spark of passion and round which humour and laughter play'. The Maratha women, especially of the aristocracy, are portrayed as singularly charming and credited with intelligence and refined manners. In the South, Nair women are admired for their unique charm. An English official, commenting on the census report about the excess of females in the Nair population, observed with mock indignation that "they could never be accused of an excess of females. The most beautiful women of India, if numerous, could never be excessive". Some others swore by the women of Canara with their lovely dark eyes and soft glossy hair falling down to the knee.

On analysis, we can conclude that the reactions of Europeans to the physical appearance of native women were influenced by their general attitude to beauty of womankind, and, also, to their association with a particular region of the country and its people.

9 *A Banjaran or Gypsy woman by William Carpenter, c. 1850*

I

This is the Ind
woman, as Brown
had read Lalla R
expected to find

II

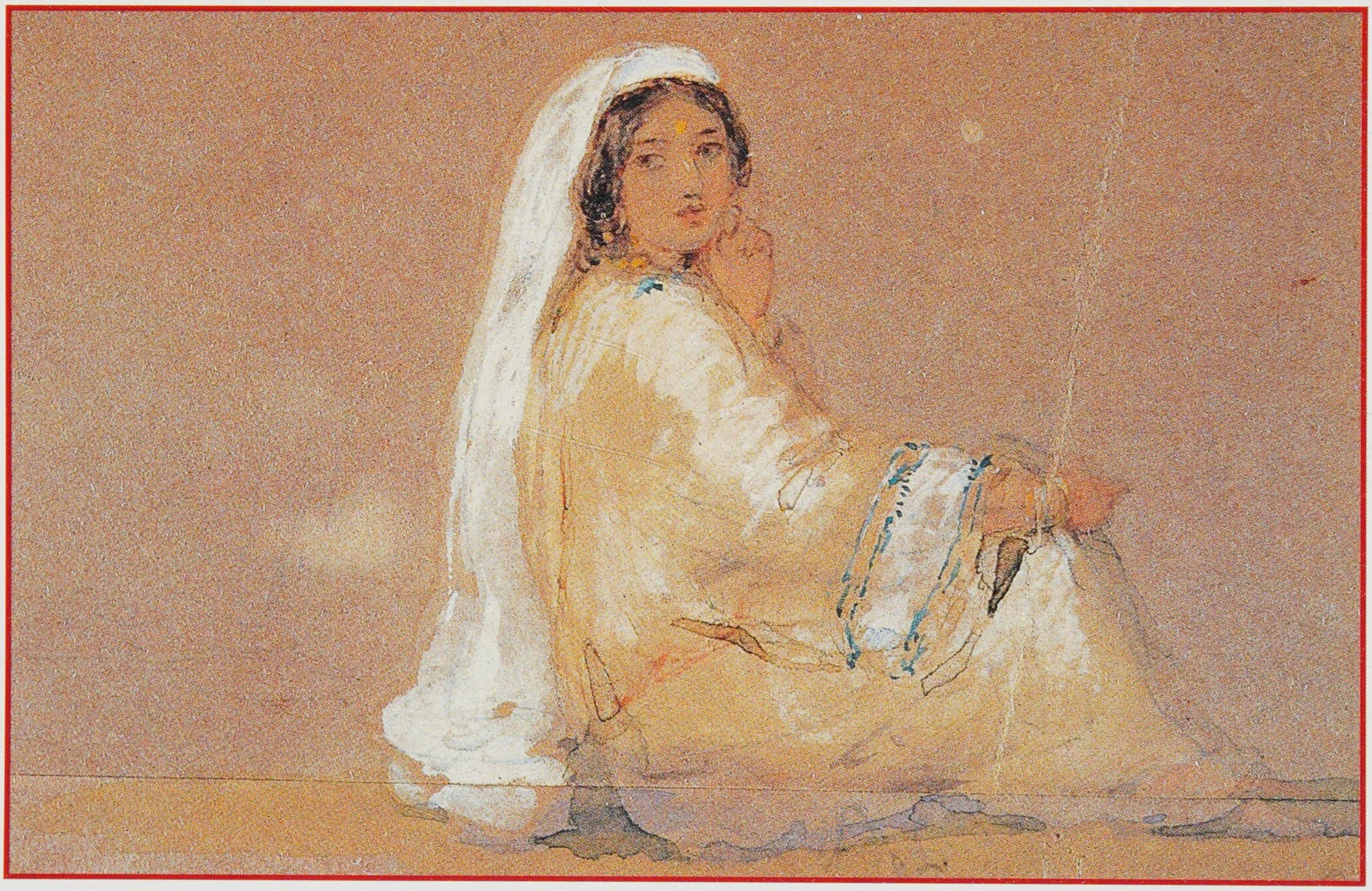
she is
found her
nding at
Apollo Bunder
Bombay.

W. Lloyd.

As traders, the British had little sense of racial superiority and dealt with Indians on equal terms. Many of them had close friendships with Indian nobles and scholars. The Indian social customs and manners were duly accepted and there were no harsh comments on the status of women in Indian society. But by the beginning of the 19th century, the atmosphere was already changing. From merchants the British became rulers, and therefore developed new ideas of superiority and a growing contempt for those they now ruled. As part of imperial design, India came to be projected as decaying and decadent culture. In sharp contrast to the enlightened attitudes of William Jones, E.T. Colebrook, James Prinsep and others, James Mill, in his *History of British India* (1818), condemned Hindu civilization as crude and inferior even to that of European middle ages. The criterion by which Mill judged the level of civilization was the status of women in society. According to him, Hindu women were in 'a state of dependence and held in extreme degradation'. The bulk of colonial writing asserted the moral superiority of the rulers by highlighting the women's question and exaggerating beyond all proportions certain prevalent practices like purdah, Sati, child marriage, polygamy etc. The missionaries, who were now extending their activities in the country blamed the Hindu and Muslim religions for the 'hideous state of society' and the abject position of Indian women which required protection and intervention of the colonial state. The British rule in India was thus justified on grounds of moral superiority and termed as a 'civilizing mission'. In British mind, India no longer figured as a land with a rich culture to be explored but as a tragic country in need of western education and social reform, particularly of rescuing Indian women from their own culture and society. The new breed of educated Indians also became enthusiastic about social reforms which resulted in a range of enactments from the abolition of Sati in 1829, through the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, to the Age of Consent Act of 1891. Though these acts covered different practices, none of them affected large number of people.

10 *Different faces of women by W. Lloyd, c. 1850*

The 'Sati' custom which was described as the most gruesome of all the practices in India was not widely prevalent and involved only an infinitesimal fraction of the millions of people and that too mainly in



11 *Hindu woman at a festival in Kashmir by William Carpenter, c. 1855*

Bengal. The custom was practically unknown in the South and in North India, among the common people there was never any question of Sati. According to K.M. Panikkar, a distinguished Indian historian, "the idea that 'Sati' was generally practised among Hindu women during this period is altogether unhistorical". It is also interesting to note how some early European travel writers had tried to explain 'Sati' as an ancient law adopted as a deterrent to wives who poisoned their husbands in order to take lovers. The belief in Sati as a penalty for husband murdering appealed to the European mind. Richard Head, author of *The English Rogue* (1666) mock-seriously suggests that the promiscuity of English women required similar legislation. Besides, unlike earlier observers who distinguished between the cruel custom and the heroism of the individual widows, the colonial rulers regarded even 'Voluntary Sati' not as proof of the will of the widow but as testimony of her being a victim of religion or Hindu male coercion. As regards enforced widowhood and child marriage, these practices remained, at least, as prevalent after the enactment of reform legislation as before because of cultural factors.

Indian women were effectively divided into two groups : Illiterate family women and educated and accomplished courtesans and dancing girls. The latter group became a target of missionary campaign which was supported by the Indian social reformers. These highly talented professionals endowed with artistic gifts of no mean order and who had preserved traditional Indian arts of dance and music over the centuries were now condemned as fallen women.

Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller, wife of a missionary, in her book *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (1890's) vehemently condemned the prevalent social customs, especially, the institutions of *devadasis* and nautch girls. She painted a dreary and dismal picture of the Indian woman and in order to improve her lot, she listed various measures to be undertaken by the social reformers as well as by the Government. She attributed the woes of Indian women to their religious beliefs. Her chief aim was to extol the virtues of Christianity and glorify the teachings of Bible which alone could bring about emancipation of women.

Around the same period, there is another account of Indian women by Flora Annie Steel, a famous literary figure of the late 19th century. She analyses the two opposing estimates of Indian womanhood – the

one favoured by most Englishmen and fostered by missionary reports, which represents as being thoroughly degraded, hopelessly, helplessly deprived and utterly enslaved; the other view on the contrary asserts that the ideals of the Indian woman are the highest in the world, and that her conduct is an example, her life free and happy. She explains the fundamental difference between the western and the eastern ideals of womanhood. After examining the two divergent standpoints, she holds the ideal eastern woman at a higher pedestal for her self–abnegation and greater moral courage. "The ideal there is of a human being who is not the equal of man; who cannot be so, since the man and the woman together make the perfect human being to whose guardianship is entrusted the immortality of the human race". She adds that the Western woman has quite as much to learn from the Eastern woman as the Eastern has from the Western. Were both to set their minds to the task they would come near to perfection. She concludes that "a good woman is a good woman all the world over. And in India, she is certainly none the less good, because behind all the senseless details... and trivialities of real life, there lies an ideal of what woman should be, which is the highest that the world has ever known".

gossips by Mrs S. C. Belnos, Bengal, c. 1820

Another contemporary author, William Crooke, noted that "much sentimentalism has been needlessly expended on the Indian Woman. Like most women in other lands, she is not slow to give expression to the pathos of life; but she no less than her husband, would resent the belief that she is downtrodden and degraded".

One of the most objective and painstaking studies of Indian women is by Mary F. Billington. She was commissioned by an English news-

13 *A group of Indian women arriving for worship at a Hindu temple by Tilly Kettle, Madras, c. 1770*

paper, *Daily Graphic* in 1890s to travel to India and undertake this study through direct contacts. Having approached the subject with an open mind and impartial attitude, she declared that in spite of countless speeches and missionary reports, Indian women were not altogether in such a pitiable plight as was made out by some of their well-wishers. About the life in the zenanas, she noted that "it would be unfair to classify it as wholly colourless and absolutely unspiritualized. Family affection enters strongly into it and even as with ourselves, blood brotherhood is a binding tie among Hindus and Mohamedans". In regard to other customs, she says that 'inaccurate sensationalism reaches its climax over the system of child marriage". She dismisses widely circulated missionary reports about five or six years old girls being married to vastly older men as baseless and too revolting to be believed. She explains that the ceremony of infancy is a mere form of betrothal and the consummation of the marriage takes place only after a girl attains womanhood.

Another woman author, Elizabeth Cooper (1915) admires the Indian woman for her innate sense of modesty, her womanliness, her love of home and children and her feminine qualities, which to the western mind may appear as weakness, but in fact constitute her appealing charm. "She wields a strong influence over husband and has more of a place in the life around her than we imagine from the stories we hear of unhappy days spent 'Behind Zenana Bars'. Her message to the world of the west, in the devotion and keeping of the home, in the love and pride of children, in her self-effacement for the good of the family, is a high message worth emulating". She emphasizes that "if the Western woman offers her gifts of modern education and intellectual advancement, her Eastern sister will not be her debtor if she, by example, presents in return the even more precious charms of obedience, modesty, and loyalty which fundamentally are the priceless jewels in the crown of world's womanhood".

Easily, the most outstanding and comprehensive study on Indian women is an early twentieth century classic, *Women of India* by Otto Rothfeld. "The book of Indian womanhood", he writes, "has many pages, and each page is different, one from the other. Living in a

14 *A Bengali woman carrying a jar of water by Fredrick W. A. Fabeck, c. 1860*

wide continent, the speech of one group of women is not as the speech of another. And in faith they are not one, nor in blood nor habit. But though the leaves of the book are of various types, yet they are all of one shape, bound in one cloth and colour. For to all of them, above all else, is contentment with their own womanhood, faith in religion and the natural hope of love. An unremitting devotion and unfailing tenderness that is the Indian woman's service in the world, and it is her loving service that has given its best to the land. India has had great preachers and great thinkers, it has had and has brave soldiers. But more than the men, more even than their best and bravest, it is the women who have deserved well of the country... For the women of India have raised an ideal, lofty and selfless, for all to behold; and they have come near its attainment. And with all its self-sacrifice and abnegation, with all its unremitting service, the ideal is not inhuman nor is it alien to the nature of womankind. It allows for weaknesses, it is kind to faults and it aspires frankly to the joys of a fulfilment deserved by service. Not without reason did the writers of old India liken the perfect woman of their land to a lotus, in that she is tender as a flower".

The 20th century witnessed revolutionary changes in the status and outlook of Indian women. The impact of modern education and western ideas has brought them to acquire an entirely new perception of themselves and their role in the economic, political and social life of the country. The new emancipated woman has now made her mark in every sphere of life. Not for thousand years or more, has the Indian woman enjoyed such freedom, dignity and respect and held such a dominating position as she does today. Even in the international fora she has won universal acclaim for her achievements in diverse fields.

How prophetic were the remarks of Marianne Postans, a full-fledged Indophile, made over 150 years ago that an emancipated Indian woman would be more than equal of her Western sister. Greatly impressed by her natural capacity and mental energy, she wrote, "Could her full dark eyes beam with intelligence and her lips speak the language of feeling, she would yield to few in attractiveness and grace, and to none perhaps in the native gentleness of her character, and the simple elegance of her general deportment".

Women Of Aristocracy

15 *Above: H. H Shah Jehan, Begum of Bhopal by Val. C. Prinsep, c. 1877*

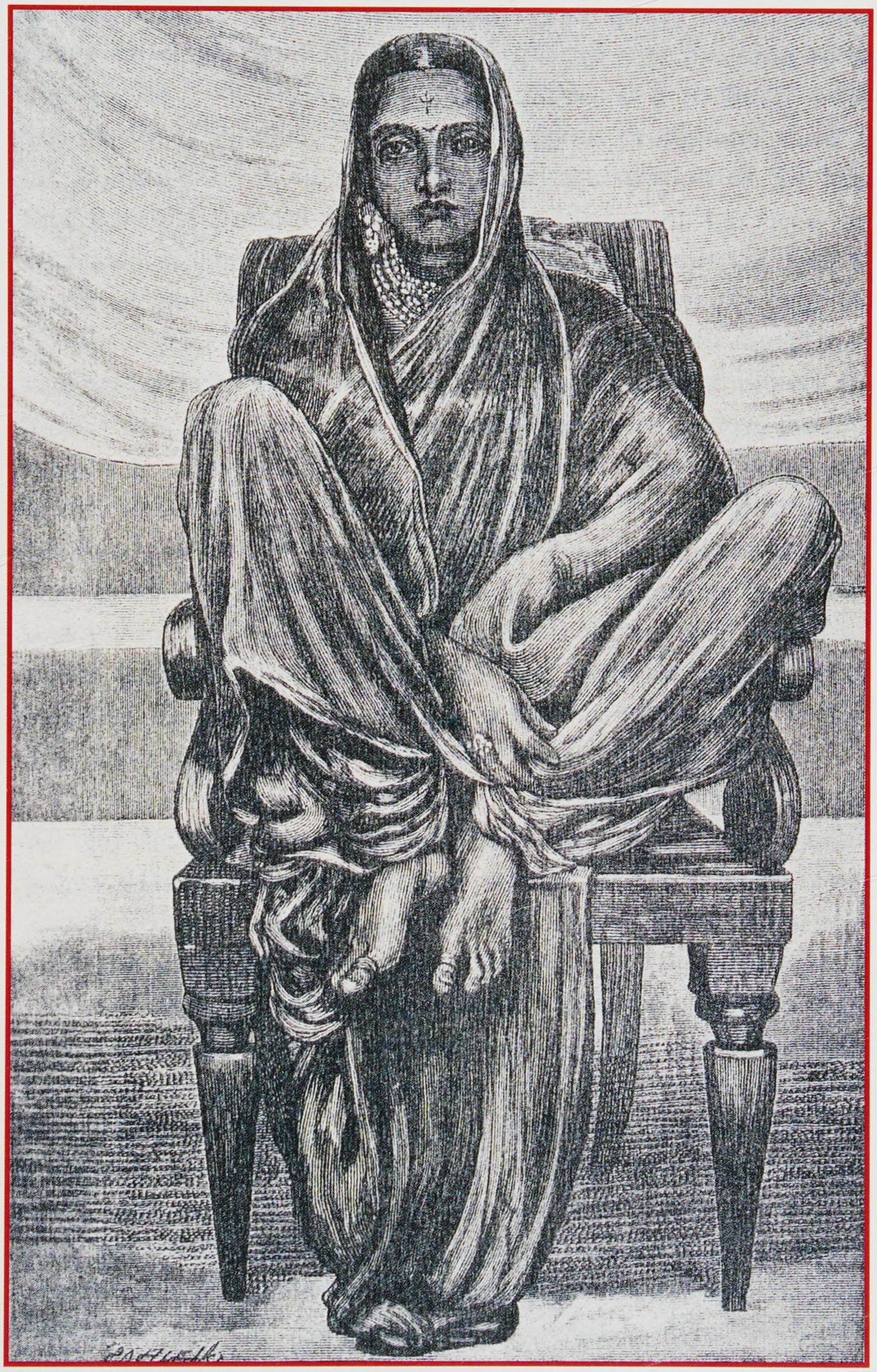
16 *Daughter of Urjit Rao, natural son of Raja of Dhar by William Carpenter, c. 1850*

There was much curiosity about women belonging to aristrocratic homes. They were secluded and kept in the Zenanas. The Muslim women observed strict purdah considered essential as part of a respectable way of life. Many high caste aristocratic Hindu families adopted this practice and emulated social customs prevalent in the Mughal times among Muslim nobility. In South India, women of rank, except those of Muslim nobles' families, could be seen and admired. This was true also of the Maratha ladies who were skilled horse riders which won the admiration of British observers. But social norms did not permit women to sit for portraits by male artists, native or foreign. The miniatures portray these women as exotic because they were almost inaccessible and had an aura of unrivalled beauty. To the European mind, the Zenana and the harem, forbidden to strangers, was a world of mystery and intrigue. No man had ever been able to reach it and record its life or the passions, joys, sorrows and tears of the women. Indeed, such was the interest that several foreign travellers took home miniatures of Indian ladies on a terrace because it showed the interior of a Zenana.

Among the earliest European observers, who claim to have gazed at the royal ladies of the Mughal Court, are Sir Thomas Roe, Bernier and Manucci. Sir Thomas Roe, the English ambassador at Jahangir's court recorded that he snatched a glimpse of the royal ladies who were equally keen to see him: "at one side in a window were his two principal wives, whose curiosity made them break little holes in a grate of reed that hung before it, to gaze on me. I saw first their fingers, and after laying their faces close, now one eye now another sometime I could discern the full proportion, they were indifferently white, black hair smooth up, but if I had no other light, their Diamonds and Pearls had sufficed to shew them: when I looked up they retyred and were so merry, that I supposed they laughed at me". In spite of his long sojourn at the Mughal Court, the French physician and traveller Francois Bernier saw even less than Roe. His *Travels in the Mughal Empire* (1656-1668) is a storehouse of varied information. He used to catch a glance of the court beauties of his day by walking behind an elephant, the tinkling of whose silver bells would entice the shy damsels to put their heads out of the windows of their litters.

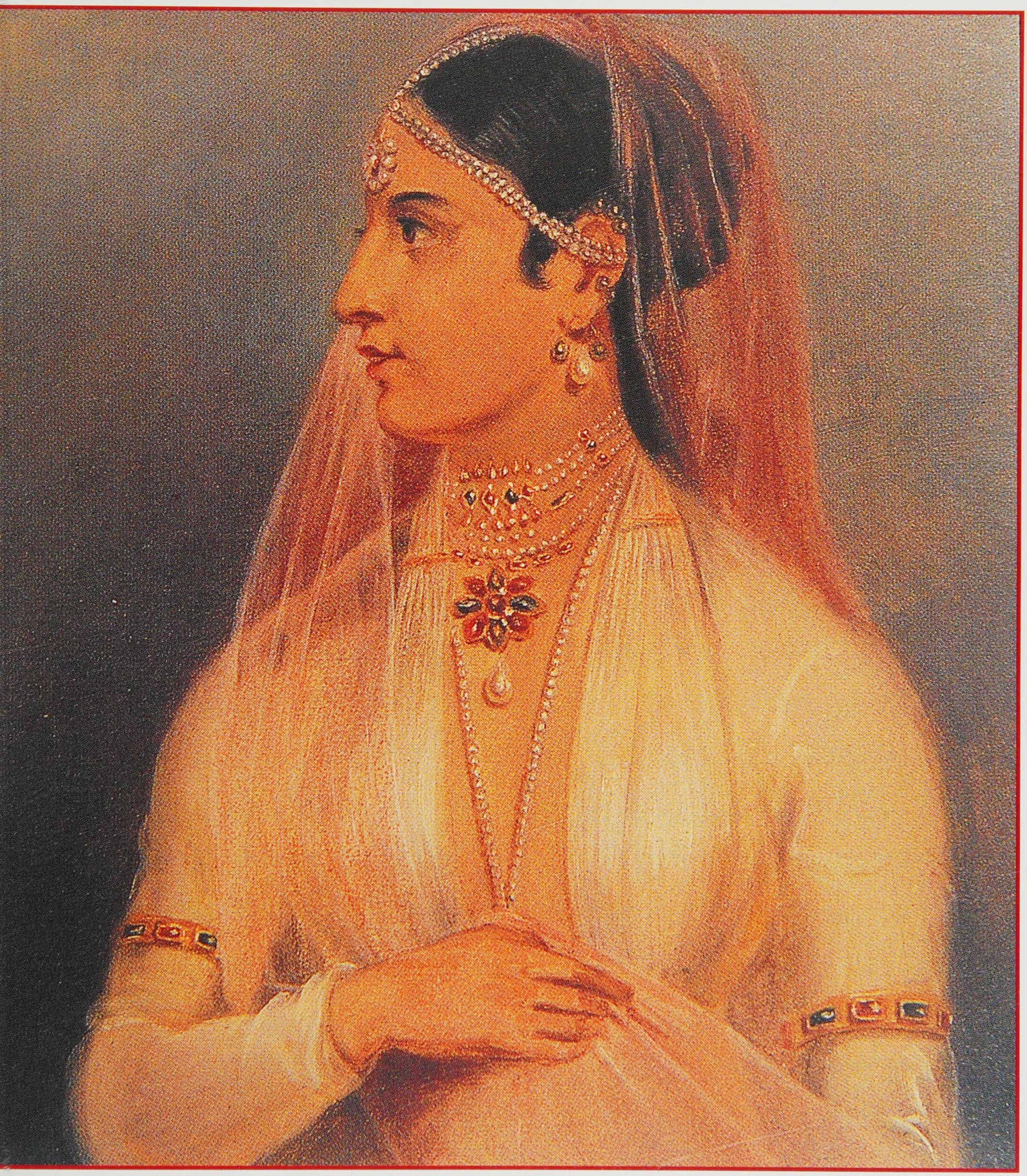
The Italian physician to Aurangzeb, Niccolao Manucci, however , claimed to have entered the harem in his capacity as a doctor. He eloquently de-

17 *A high caste woman standing by a well by William Daniell, c. 1829*



18 *H. H. Jumna Bae, Maharanee of Baroda by Val. C. Prinsep, c. 1877*

19 *Hinda, a generalised name for an Indian woman, presumably the favourite wife of the ing of Oudh by George Beechey, c. 1830*

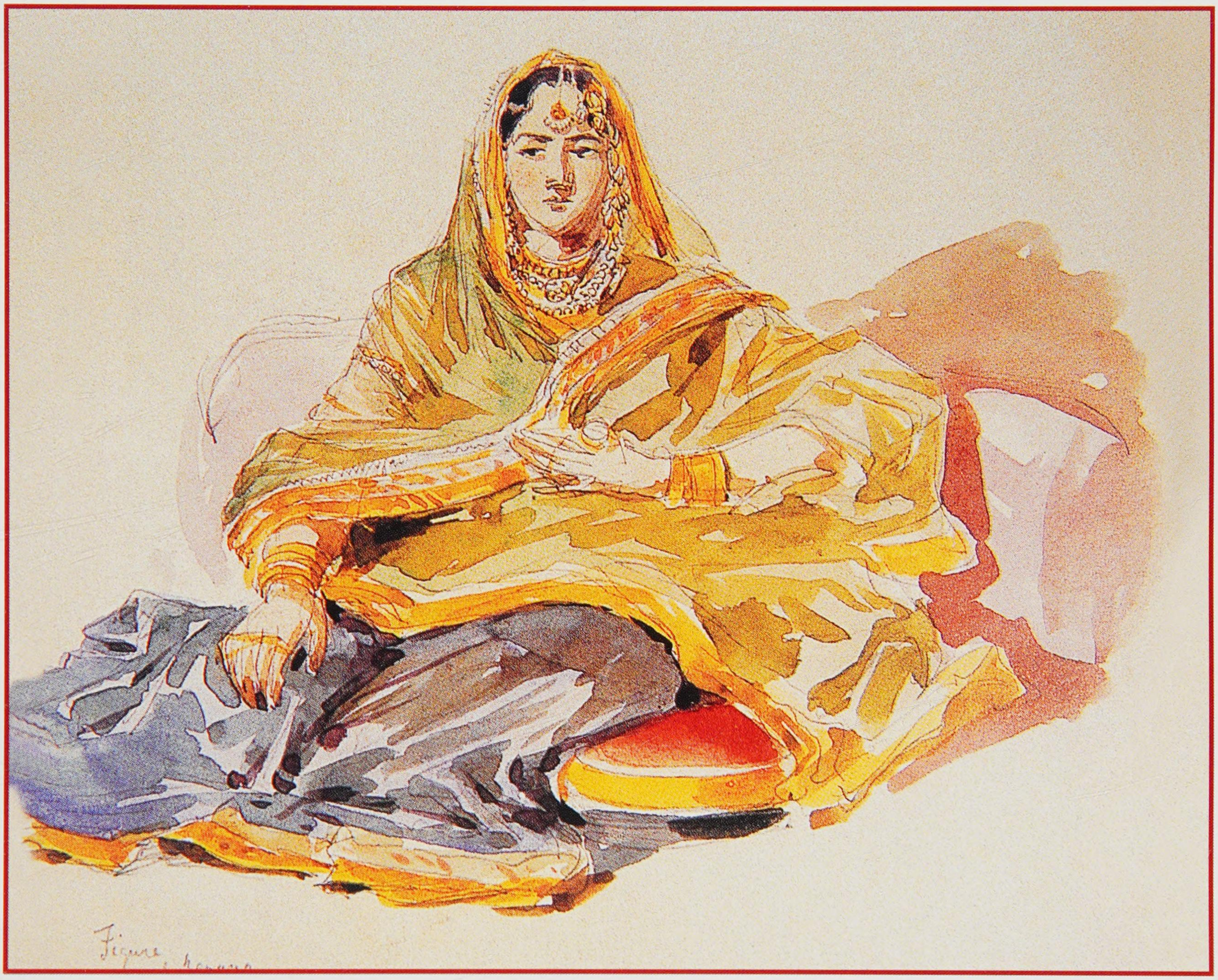


20 *The Rajpootanee Bride* by *William Daniell, c. 1829*

scribes the ladies' fine clothes and extravagant jewellery and writes that they often feigned illness so that "they may have the chance of some conversation with and have their pulse felt, by the physician". He had to stretch his hand inside the curtain and sometimes it was held, kissed, softly bitten and even placed on the breast.

We come across a unique mid 18th century account by an English Lady published in England in 1743 and reproduced by an American Journal *Virginia Gazette.* It is about her meeting with a Nawab's wife at Madras. She describes in detail the opulence of the Begum's costume and exotic richness of her jewellery with several strings of glittering diamonds and pearls. She adds: "Her person is slim, genteel, middle stature, her complexion tawny, her eyes black as possible, large and fine, and painted at the edges; her lips were coloured red, and between every tooth, which were white and regular, was painted black, to look like ebony... Her face was done over with frosted work of leaf gold; the nails of her fingers and toes were painted red; so were the insides of her hands; her hair was black as jet, very long and thick, comb'd neatly back and braided; it hung much below her waist". She was 'amazed and astounded' by such a picture of luxury and noted that she thought she was in a dream sequence all the time. She concluded "that these immense riches are all the enjoyments they have; for they are not suffered to stir out all the year round; and when obliged to travel, are covered up in their palanquins in such a manner that no mortal can see them, and it would be death for any man to attempt it".

Some women authors who had access to Zenanas used the opportunity to study the customs and manners of ladies of rank and offer graphic descriptions of their lifestyle. A general belief that emanated from these stories about the "hoories of the East" was that every woman behind purdah was exceptionally beautiful. However, that inveterate traveller, Fanny Parks mentions in her *Wanderings of a Pilgrim, in search of the Picturesque* (1850) that "in a whole zenana there may be two or three handsome women, and all the rest remarkably ugly". She visited the Zenana of the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah and met a princess and some other ladies who struck her as singularly plain but there were dancing girls of rare beauty. On the other hand, John Henry Grose in his *Voyage to the East Indies* (1766) observes that Indians "take care to have their seraglios, or harems furnished with the handsomest women that can be procured for love or money. Those of



21 *Shahzada Begum, a woman of rank at Delhi by William Simpson, Delhi, c. 1860 (John Goelet Collection)*

22 *H. H. Begum Sumroo by Lowes Dickinson, c. 1820*

23 *Lakshmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, from a contemporary engraving, c. 1850*

Kashmir are the most preferred... being much fairer and having besides the advantage of delicacy in shape and make, which is chiefly in request among them. This taste they even push to such an extravagance, as to a scruple no price hardly for a female slave, which to her other beauties should have that added of a plumpness covering the smallest bones that can be imagined, for the bone they think the weight chiefly consists, and therefore those who weigh the least, are by them reckoned the rarest and most delicate pieces".

Another authentic account about the life in the Zenana and the relationship between the several wives is provided by Mrs. Meer Hassan Ali, an English lady, married to a Lucknow noble (1816-1828). In her fascinating work, *Observations on the Mussulmauns of India* (1832) she describes a high class Muslim lady as "the bird from the nest immured in a cage but cheerful, contented and satisfied with the seclusion to which she was born... As a good wife she receives her husband with undisguised pleasure, although she has just before learned that another member has been added to his well peopled harem". Mrs. Ali adds that "ladies of the Zenana were not restricted from the society of their own sex and had companions amongst their dependents. Some ladies of rank had two to ten companions independent of slaves and domestics and there were some of the Royal Family of Lucknow who entertained in their service two or three hundred female dependents, of all classes".

There is another absorbing account of Cutch ladies by Mrs. Marianne Postans who made a comprehensive study of the people of Cutch. She visited the harem of the Rao of Cutch and was struck by the amazing beauty and charm of the queen mother, the Rani. She was the daughter of a chief of Soodahs, a community of Thurr desert famous for the remarkable beauty of their women who were sought after by the Rajput Chiefs. She records "if lusty love would go in quest of beauty, few of the daughters of the land could I think compete with the passing fairness of the Soodah maidens". While giving a detailed description of the Rani's glittering jewels and every piece of her costume... she mentions that "Her bodice was of the same material as the petticoat, having the form of the bosom, marked by circular rows of seed pearl".

There were also a few Company civilians and soldiers who had the rare opportunity of observing Indian ladies of rank and their reports are quite informative and interesting. James Forbes, who spent nearly twenty years in

24 *A Hindostany Lady of Rank by Sir Charles D'oyly, c. 1820*

25 *Above: A Mohammedan Lady by Sir Charles D'oyly, c. 1820*
26 *Left: Zeenat Mahal, the favourite wife of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the King of Delhi by unknown artist, c. 1857*

27 *Princess Victoria Gouramma, daughter of king Viraja of Coorg ,*
by F. Winterhalter, London, c. 1835

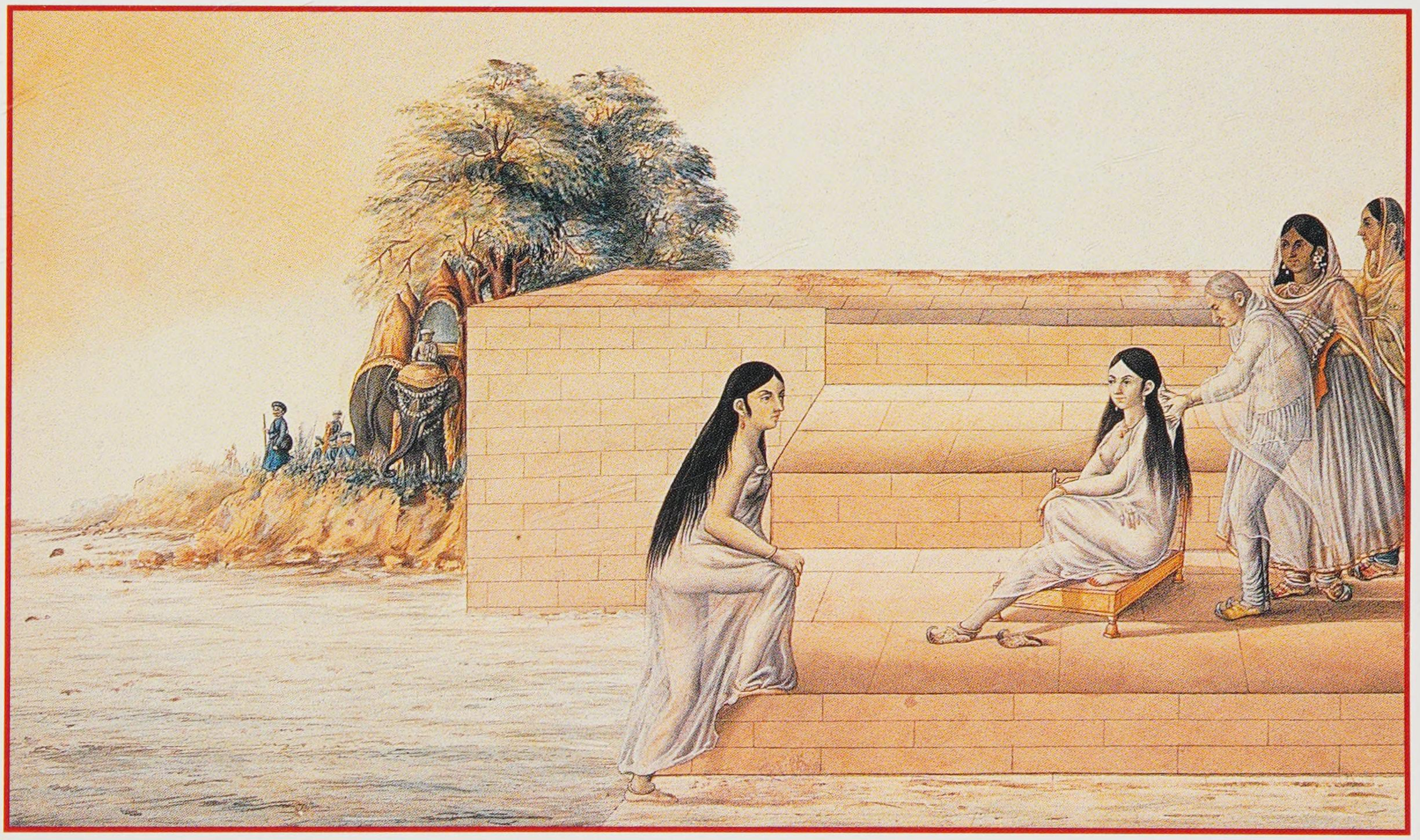
India (1765-84) gives a comprehensive account of life in Western India in his monumental work, *Oriental Memoirs* (1813). He saw an upper class Muslim lady at Surat and acclaimed her to be "one of the greatest beauties he ever beheld". He writes: "her form was perfect, her features regular, and her large antelope eyes of brilliant lustre; although fairer than the generality of Indian females, neither the rose nor the lily adorned her complexion. Yet the brunette tint rather enriched than impaired the softness and delicacy of her skin; grace was in all her steps and her whole deportment delicate and courteous". Admiring the dress worn by another Mughal lady, he writes, "her drawers of green satin flowered with gold, were seen under a chemise of transparent gauze, reaching to her slippers, richly embroidered; a vest of pale blue satin edged with gold sat close to her shape, which an upper robe of striped silver muslin, full and flowing, displayed to a great advantage; a netted veil of crimson silk, flowered with silver, fell carelessly over her long braided hair, combed smooth, and divided from the forehead, where a cluster of jewels was fastened by strings of seed-pearl".

Sir Richard Burton, traveller, scholar and prolific writer and translator of Kama Sutra took pride in interacting with the upperclass Sindhi women. He tells us how, posing as a half Arab, half Iranian travelling salesman, - 'with hair falling upon his shoulders, a long beard, face and hands, arms and feet, stained with a think coat of henna, Mirza, Abdullah of Bushire - your humble servant', - he managed to get entry into the secluded quarters and talked to women. Sometimes in a new town he would set up a shop and give heavy discounts to all the ladies, - particularly the pretty ones, - that honoured him by patronising his concern. His personal responses to their physical attraction and feminine charm are expressed in colourful language: "Her eyes are large and full of fire, black and white as an onyx stone, with long drooping lashes undeniably beautiful. I do not know exactly whether to approve of that setting of *Kajal* which encircles the gems; it heightens the colour and defines the form, but also it exaggerates the eyes into becoming the feature of the face - which is not advisable. However, I dare not condemn it". He adds, "The nose is straight, and thin nostrils are delicately turned. You perhaps do not, I do, admire their burden - a gold flower, formed like a buttercup, and encrusted with pearls; at any rate, the bit of black ribbon which connects it with the front hair is strictly according to the canons of contrast. The mouth is well formed but somewhat sensual in its appear-

ance; the teeth are like two rows of jessamine buds - the dentist and the dentifrice being things unknown - and moles imitated with a needle dipped in antimony give a tricolour effect to the oral region".

Women of rank in the south were not necessarily secluded. Lord Valentia who came to India as a tourist, to see the country and pay his respects to the Mughals, reports in his *Voyages and Travels to India* (1809) that he shook hands with the Rani of Ramnad. He also managed to meet the widow of Nana Fadnavis, a Maratha lady. Col. Broughton of the East India Company was impressed by Maratha women, their bold look and manners, riding on horseback along with their husbands. The Marathas, in fact, never accepted the Muslim custom of keeping their women under restraint. Sir John Malcolm, a famous soldier and administrator and author of *Political History of India* (1826) observes that Maratha women, owning estates of their own, did much as they pleased, seldom wearing the veil, entertaining their friends and spending money on clothes and jewellery. Bhima Bai, daughter of Jaswant Rao Holkar, told him that, as she had neither husband nor son, it was her duty to lead her troops in battle.

Among the historical figures who came in contact with the East India Company were: Baiza Bai, Luxmi Bai, Rani of Jhansi and Rani Jindan of Lahore. Baiza Bai, a Maratha princess, widow of Daulat Rao Scindia, was an intelligent woman, whose political ambitions were thwarted by the laws - both British and Indian. Mrs. Parks who befriended Baiza Bai, writes: "Her countenance is very mild and open, there is freedom and independence in her air that I greatly admire". The famous Rani of Jhansi, who played a leading role during the 1857 mutiny had greatly impressed the British with the force and charm of her personality. They also recognized that she had the character and capacity to rule the state. Sir Robert Hamilton, the Company's Agent in Central India, considered her to be "very civil, polite and clever young lady". She was a good-looking woman 'rather stout but not too stout'. John Lang who knew her, writes: "Her face must have been very handsome when she was younger and even now it had many charms... The expression also was very intelligent. The eyes were particularly fine and the nose very delicately shaped. She was not very fair, though she was far from black... Her dress was plain white muslin, so



28 *Top: A lady of rank taking bath with her attendants by Mrs S. C. Belnos, Calcutta, c. 1820*
29 *Above: Women bathing at a river ghat. A lady of rank is seated and her hair is being dried by an old lady. Another lady is coming out of water by a Lucknow artist for his British patron, c. 1800*

fine in texture and drawn about her in such a way that the outline of her figure was plainly discernible - and a remarkably fine figure she had. What spoilt her was her voice". She used to dress like a man (with a turban) and rode like one. Rani Jindan came into limelight when she tried to unite the Sikh Chiefs under her leadership to thwart the British drive to annex Punjab. "The Rani" according to Herbert Edwards, author of *A YEAR ON THE PUNJAB FRONTIER* (1851)" ... had more wit and daring than any man of her nation". Another account describes her to be in "possession of a wonderful ability to act with energy and spirit". She was also reported, to be "skilful in the use of her pen" as revealed by her correspondence with the British Resident, Henry Lawrence (1847).

British artists who were patronized by Indian rulers and princes, found themselves restricted to portraying men. Among the rare exceptions was the artist George Beechy, the court painter to the king of Oudh in 1830s. He did a number of paintings in romantic and sentimental poses as well as semi-erotic pictures of women for the king. He was allowed access to the royal Zenana so that he could do the portrait of the favourite wife of the king. This well known painting entitled 'Hinda' (a common name for Indian women) was greatly admired at an exhibition in London in 1832. William Simpson, another professional artist who visited India in 1860s, was interested in the lives of upper class women. While in Delhi his host Mr. Wagentreiber, editor of the *DELHI PUNCH* arranged his visit to a Zenana. He was delighted to see the Begum in her glittering attire and shining jewellery. This is how he describes her appearance: "a small silken vest, trimmed with a gilt edging, merely covers the breasts. Between the very small vest and the pyjamas, there is a pretty large hiatus in the costumes which might rather astonish a European lady".

The code of behaviour towards women of rank was highly dignified. They were respected and their prestige was high because they were seen only occasionally. Alexander Dow writes: "Women are so sacred in India that even the common soldiery leave them unmolested in the midst of slaughter and devastation. The harem is a sanctuary against all the licentiousness of victory, and ruffians covered with the blood of a husband shrink back with confusion from the secret apartments of his wives".

Village Women

30 *Above: A Hindu maiden standig by a river in Gujarat by Capt. R. M. Grindlay, c. 1820*

Rural life was singularly free from purdah and women moved about freely. It was in the countryside that foreign travellers and artists saw women, young and old. They saw them walking or standing around in dusty village lanes. The women could be seen sitting and chatting, working on farms, drawing water at the well, bathing and praying at the river ghats and even worshipping trees. They watched them, working on a grinding stone, husking rice and making cakes of cowdung fuel and plastering them against the walls of their houses. It was almost a routine of their daily life to ply their spinning wheel in the afternoon and in the evening carry their offerings to the temple. It was not all work and no play. The monotony of their lives was broken by feasts and ceremonials as well as village fairs. In spring time they would go to the nearest stream in the evenings and float small earthen lighted lamps. The romanticised or idealised image of village women was vividly captured by many a professional and amateur artist.

A fine portrayal of Indian maidens by Waterfield in his *Indian Ballads*, is reminiscent of description in Sanskrit literature. That seems to have fired the imagination of British artists. Following verses are a fine example of poetic imagination:

"Where the deep blue waters glide,
By the lonely river-side,
With a stately step she trod,
Like a daughter of a God,

Bright her brow as the autumn moon,
Black her locks as the clouds of June,
Round her neck as the ring-dove's throat,
Sweet her voice as the Koel's note,
Slender her waist as the lion's mate,
Stately her pace, as the elephant's gait.

Dark her hair as the long black snake,
Lovely her hand as the pride of the lake,
Graceful her arms as the creeper's shoot,
Ruddy her lips as the Vimba's fruit,
Golden her face as the champak's hue
Blushing her cheeks as the rose bud new,
Smooth her limbs as the plantain's stem
Piercing her eyes as the polished gem
Whiter her teeth as the Jasmin's smile
Strong in her beauty a saint to beguile".

31 *Bathing ghat, Calcutta by Egron Lundgren, c. 1858*

32 *Village women of Bengal grinding flour outside a hut by Arthur William Devis, c. 1800*

The Western concept of beauty influenced the portrayal of village women. Their colourful clothes and dusky charm appealed to British artists.

The ghats - flights of steps to the river - presented an animated scene at all hours of the day, but especially in the morning when women with their graceful garments and still more graceful persons glided up and down the steps. Even the cold weather did not hold them back from venturing into the river.

William Hodges, the first British professional artist to visit India in late 18th century, was in raptures on seeing village women at the ghats. He watched them bathing, observing that the younger women in particular, delayed and lingered 'sporting and playing like Naiads or Syrens'. He wrote: "To a painter's mind, the fine antique figures never fail to present themselves when he observes a beautiful female form ascending these steps from the river with wet drapery, which perfectly display the whole person, and with vases on their heads, carrying water to the temples". Over the years, Indian film-makers have used such descriptions to great advantage, showing women drenched in rain or river.

The delightful sight of women at the river ghats inspired many a Company official and soldier to record his impressions in diaries and journals. Lt. Thomas Bacon who watched women at the ghats of the Ganges was captivated by their grace and charm. They could make any Englishwoman envious. He noted: "I saw several at the ghats who struck me as being remarkably beautiful, both in feature and figure, although their complexions were exceedingly dark; their forms were particularly slight, and bearing such an air of elegance and graceful ease, as could not fail to attract admiration; their faces too were of a more Grecian mould than I had hitherto seen among them; in this the effect was considerably heightened by the simplicity of their costume and the classical style in which the *chuddur*, or large scarf, was thrown across their figures. There is one charm, and by no means a slight one, which is possessed by a large majority of the native women; I speak of their small feet, and particularly good ankles, and of their free and elastic step, which may well excite the envy of any beholding Englishwoman, with her pinching satin shoe and delicate silk stocking. But who, among our starched and tight-laced, though lovely women, would venture to place the charms of her cramped figure in competition with the unshackled graces exhibited among these children of nature".

33 *A hill woman smoking by R Clint, c. 1860*

34 *Indian girl by George Morland, c. 1790*

Capt. Godfrey Charles Mundy, A.D.C. to the Commander in-chief, Lord Combermere (1825-30) was romantically inclined towards native women and keenly observed them 'laughing and chattering' in the Ganges. He noticed how in the unfrequented spots of the river they took a hasty glance up the bank and along the shore, disengaged themselves in an instant from their saree and plunged into the stream. He noted in his journal: "in the ecstasy of the moment, and in their desire to admit the sacred element to immediate and unveiled contact with their persons, the fair pilgrims did not quite sustain their usually modest decorous management of their drapery in the river bath. In general, however, it is but fair to say the women carry their modesty of manner, not to mention morals to an almost ridiculous extent. Should you meet a group of peasant women on the road, they generally stop, turn their backs, and draw their fillet or head-cloth over their faces - a very provoking and curiosity-exciting practice".

There is another poetic description of bathing women at river ghats by Capt. Thomas Skinner who was thrilled by the sight as they "rose from the wave, and stood with their transparent drapery floating about them to comb their long locks - like mermaids in all but their want of mirrors. When their hair is nearly dry, they hold their clean robes like a screen round their figures; and shaking the wet ones off them, draw the others close and are dressed in a moment".

Bishop Reginald Heber of Calcutta (1823-26), not immune to feminine charms has made many references to pretty young women in his journal *Narrative of a Journey* which contains some fascinating descriptive material about India. Struck by the style of a pretty young country woman at a river ghat, he recorded: "She went in with her mantle wrapped round her with much decency and even modesty, till the river was breast high, then ducked under water for so long a time that I began to despair of her reappearance. This was at five'o clock in the morning, and she returned again at twelve to undergo the same process, both times walking home in her wet clothes without fear of catching cold. The ancient Greeks had, I am convinced the same custom, since otherwise the idea of wet drapery would hardly have occurred to their statuaries, or, at least, would not have been so common".

The other familiar sight in villages was of women carrying waterpots from the wells. Describing the scene, an English artist, C.R. Francis (1848)

observed that "to a traveller in the East, the best opportunities of making his observations on the females will occur in the evening at the wells. Day after day, at sun-set, they issue forth from their respective dwellings in the villages, carrying pitchers upon their heads and sometimes children upon their hips; and so they cheerfully make for the general rendezvous; for, though the business of fetching water be a laborious one, yet the women contrive to draw an enjoyment even out of this irksome duty, as it affords one of the best opportunities they have of meeting and talking together, and of displaying their finery to each other. Free from the fashionable bodily restraints to which many European ladies subject themselves, the Hindoo female, in her simple robe, stands unequalled for symmetry of figure, and elegance of carriage".

There are several vivid accounts of women carrying water pitchers balanced on their heads, planting their pretty feet with precision in the light and stately manner. Most observers agreed that the step of Indian village woman was a thing of joy as her frame was trained to a graceful poise by the constant carrying of water pots. Capt. Mundy's observation on this aspect of Indian woman is perhaps the most vivid: "I know no more elegant object in nature than the Hindu girl returning from the well; her light graceful raiments veiling, yet not concealing or impeding the movements of her upright and supple figure and slender though well rounded limbs with the classic shaped vase artfully poised on her head, and seldom requiring the support of the naked bangled arm which is perhaps as often raised from coquetry as from necessity. It does one's heart good to see these elegant creatures cheerfully performing their domestic offices, and rendering even labour graceful. You may talk of your French woman's walk - it may be pretty - indeed it is so; but is it natural? She goes pitter-patting along as though she feared at each step to burst her shoe. My Indian daughter of nature has no shoe to burst; but she plants a very pretty bare foot with precision, yet lightness; and floats past, unencumbered with the weighty vase, which her slender neck seems almost too fragile to support".

Another interesting description also attributes the elegant and erect stature of young women to their carrying waterpots on their head. "They all carry two or three waterpots on their heads, each successive pot being smaller than the one beneath it... This habit of carrying their *gharahs*, or Jars

35 *Top: Market women at Ajmer by Mortimer Menpes, c. 1900*
36 *Above: Native girls filling water jugs in a river by William Daniell, c. 1810*

37 *Women of Ladakh by William Carpenter, c. 1855*

38 *Hiramal, a woman of Chini, Shimla hills by William Simpson, c. 1860 (John Goelet Collection)*

filled with water, from their early youth, may account, in a great measure, for their graceful carriage. They balance their pitchers so equally as not even to require any assistance from the hand". Watching them, the writer was reminded of certain passages in the Bible, and came to the conclusion that "Hindoos are a people of great antiquity".

According to another observer, women at the village well with graceful robes and fine straight figures were picturesque and presented thoroughly oriental sight. He was amused when he watched them splashing water and chattering away without restraint. There was seldom a man around to force them to be bashful, their normal demeanour.

James Forbes was overwhelmed by the village nymphs of Gujarat. In their simple attire he found them more captivating than the women of aristocracy overloaded with finery and ornaments. He also admires their generous hospitality. During his travels, these village women drew water from the wells for his party and offered them butter, milk, vegetables, fruits and flowers.

It was around the village well that the women spent much time. They came in groups of every caste and age, wives of farmers and labourers, old women and young mothers with small naked children. Here they met friends and with hurried pratlle talked of the night, and the coming day, of a visit to the village fair or the town bazar. There was curiosity about the scandal of a wanton neighbour. They discussed in hushed tones. Even the visit of the priest was a subject that was of much interest.

After the well, it was the temple where village women would gather to pray and worship their deities. Their thinking and actions were moulded, from childhood to the day of death, by the dictates of religion. Life was not so much action as a response to divine ordinance. So they believed. The belief persists in many places which have not been overtaken by the so-called civilization or greed and the lure of money. At the temple women would take vows for their husbands' well-being and long life or seek the supreme gift of a child, especially a son. Marriage for them, as for their husbands, was not for erotic pleasure; it was a religious duty to the unborn.

Villages in the hills were quite clean, almost free from disease, heat and dust of the plains. The women there have been described as tall and straight, with smooth skin. They looked bright with chestnut com-

39 *Woman and her baby, Sikkim by Percy Brown, c. 1910*

plexion. They had a sense of humour and were talkative. Nor were they shy like the women in the plains and were also free from guile. Capt. Skinner describes his encounter with women from the hills near a spring where they had gathered to fetch water in their pitchers. He struck up a conversation with them and writes: "I asked a pretty woman, of about eighteen years of age, who had come out to present us with a bowl of raspberries, how many husbands she had. 'Only four' was the reply. 'And all alive?' 'Why not?' She questioned me in return, and asked where my country was. When I told her it was several months' journey from here, there was general murmur of incredulity; 'It is not possible' they all answered. 'And where is your wife? was the next inquiry. On my declaring I had none, an universal cry of 'Bah, bah! Djoot, djoot!' - A lie, a lie! showed how little they believed me. Where such beings as bachelors and spinsters after fourteen or fifteen years of age are unknown, no wonder they should receive with doubt, such a declaration, I found it impossible to convince them of my veracity, and I fear I lost a little in the estimation of my mountain friends by asserting so palpable an absurdity as any man being without a wife appears to them". He also heard a song by the hill women working on the farms. It was about what they thought of the foreign travellers. The feats of the white men were the unchanging and apparently an inexhaustible subject. A free rendering of the song as given by Skinner is as follows:

Lo! the white men have been to the mountains of snow,
And have seen the great Gunga flow over the plain;
Let us labour no more, for the rice crop will grow;
The white men must always bring wealth in their train.

See the white men are smiling; the maids they adore
Are far, far away, in the realms of the west.
Do they smile upon us? - we will labour no more;
When the white men are happy, their servants are blest.

See, the tents are all spread - they have kindled the fires,
And the travellers will rest in the valley today
We will labour no more; all the white man desires
We will hasten to offer, and court him to stay.

Bibis and Mistresses

40 *Begum Faiz Bakhsh, (detail of plate 42) by Francesco Renaldi, Calcutta, 1786*

Imperial enterprise was a masculine affair. In the exotic realms of Hindustan, some of the traders and adventurers found outlets for their surplus emotional and sexual energy, somewhat suppressed in more inhibited and prudish Britain, where sex was regarded as a curse, stemming from the original sin and penalties for extramarital affairs and sexual deviations were severe.

Deterred by the dangers of a long and tortuous voyage, few British women ventured to come to India. The original charters of the East India Company forbade women on its posts. The Portuguese, who had preceded the British, used to send annually batches of women for marriage to their officials in Goa. British settlers, at first, married widows and daughters of Portuguese Catholics, which did not find favour with the East India Company. So, towards the end of the 17th Century, the Company copied the Portuguese practice and shipped batches of young women who were divided into "gentlewomen" and others for the marriage mart in India. As the demand for wives was far in excess of supply, some of the women took to prostitution as a more lucrative vocation than marriage. For this "scandalous" behaviour, they were warned to mind their morals; otherwise they were to be fed on bread and water and shipped back home. The experiment of importing women was abandoned by the Company in the 18th century, leaving their servants to find women for themselves.

Towards the end of the 18th century, there were only 250 European women in Calcutta, while there were 4,000 men. The civilians and soldiers were, therefore, encouraged and even subsidised by the Company to take native wives and mistresses. It was a common practice for the sahibs to set up Zenanas or keep Indian bibis. The bibi was an Indian mistress, a common law wife, or long term consort of the Englishman, who could afford to set up even a modest establishment. At times they got married but there were insuperable difficulties in the way of a Christian marriage with a pagan.

Capt. Thomas Williamson, who spent 20 years in the Company's service in India, in his famous guide book, *East India Vade Mecum,* justified the practice of keeping Indian mistresses as they were far more economical than maintaining European wives. According to him, "The attachment of many European gentlemen to their native mistresses is not to be described. An infatuation beyond all comparison prevails, causing every confidence, of

41 *Left: Muslim lady seated, holding the mouthpiece of a hookah, presumably an Englishman's bibi by Francesco Renaldi, Calcutta, 1787 (Private Collection)*

42 *The Palmer family- General William Palmer with his senior bibi Begum Faiz Bakhsh on his right and the junior Lucknow bibi on his left by Francesco Renaldi, Calcutta, 1786*

43 *A young Indian woman, perhaps 'Jemdanee', the popular bibi of William Hickey, famous Calcutta attorney by Thomas Hickey, Calcutta, 1787*

whatever description, to be reposed in the sable queen of the harem. In return, many of these women have conducted themselves invariably in the most decorous manner and evinced the utmost fidelity, in every particular way, to their keepers; some have absolutely sacrificed property to no inconsiderable amount, and given up every pretension to caste; that is to admission among those of the same sect, or faith, braving the most bitter taunts, and the reproaches of their friends and relatives". He adds that "a woman under the protection of a European gentleman, is counted not only among the natives, but even by his countrymen to be equally sacred, as though she were married to him - some are said to have passed twenty years or more, without the possibility for scandal to attach to their conduct".

Until the arrival of Englishwomen in increasing numbers after the introduction of overland route via Egypt, those few of them who came to India were mere adventuresses from lower stock. They were not, in the opinion of one male resident, "either in the education of intellect or heart what an intelligent, reflecting and cultivated man would select as his companion". They also got so intoxicated with their sudden elevation that many a sahib preferred an Indian bibi to these women. Innes Munroe (1780-84) in his journal laments his countrymen's preference for the native to white women. Further, the 'upright, supple and slender well-rounded limbs' of Indian girls and their smooth skin of a bright chestnut colour added to their sexual attraction and no doubt turned many a male head. Samuel Brown, a company official, noted that "the native women were so amusingly playful, so anxious to please, that a person, accustomed to their society, shrinks from the idea of encountering the whims, or yielding to the furies of an Englishwoman". Sir Garnet Wolseley, who was in India just after the mutiny, confessed to his brother that he managed to console himself with a beautiful Eastern princess who answered all the purposes of a wife without giving any of the bother; he had no wish to be caught in European marriage by "some bitch" unless an heiress.

Dr. John Shortt, Company surgeon at Madras during the latter half of the 19th century, was charmed by the grace and beauty of Telugu girls. He recorded, "I have seen several of these girls in my professional capacity, while they lived as mistresses with European officers, and have been greatly surprised at their ladylike manner, modesty and gentleness. Such beautiful small hands and little taper fingers, the ankles neatly turned, as to meet the

44 *A European in Nawabi dress with his young junior bibi standing beside him and the senior bibi sitting on the far right by Francesco Renaldi, Lucknow, c. 1794*

admiration of the greatest connoisseur... This is not to be wondered at that these girls are preferred to their own country women". There was an army colonel who even consented to be circumcised in order to get possession of a beautiful Muslim woman who imposed this condition before becoming his bibi. It sounds amusing to find that an English Editor of a local paper advised sahibs in 1783, to sleep with Indian women to keep themselves cool in the beastly summer of Calcutta. In fact, the Portuguese obtained a *firman* from the Mughal emperor, Shahjahan, to keep Bengali women during summer to protect themselves from the heat of the Delta.

Resorting to bibis and mistresses was not only a piece of erotic expediency, but these, "sleeping dictionaries" helped the sahibs to learn about the lifestyle, customs and manners, besides languages, of India. The bibi identified herself with the interests of her protector. She was an efficient housekeeper and a devoted nurse to her man when he fell ill. There was no stigma attached to these liaisons. At times, their mutual love and respect was touching. The bibi of a sahib was highly respected in society. Emma Roberts writes that "Indian women, Hindu or Muslim, when they are attached to Englishmen confine themselves with singular dignity to the Zenana of their protectors as if the marriage had taken place according to their own customs and ceremonies. They never go out of their houses and behave like a lawful wife of Muslim or Hindu of rank". The "bibikhana" or "ladyhouse" in a corner of the compound, separate from the main house, was an accepted feature of many an European bungalow.

For the greater part of the 18th century, the Company's officials had come to India to make a fortune through private trade and various other means, fair or foul. A favourite after-dinner toast of those days was "a lass and a lakh a day" a normal objective for men who saw a lakh of rupees a worthwhile target, and a bibi, an Indian mistress, a fitting companion. The post - Plassey English *"nabobs"* emulated the ostentatious lifestyle of native princes and omrahs. For some of them a large zenana became a status symbol. Williamson cites the case of an elderly military character who derived solace from no less than 16 mistresses of all sorts and sizes. He reckoned that the expenses on his mistresses were much less as compared with the cost of maintaining an English wife. The legendary David Ochterlony, the British Resident in Delhi, popularly known as "Loony Akhtar", lived like a prince. He used to take the air in the evening, accompanied by 13 Indian

45 *Indian lady, perhaps the bibi of John Wombell, the Company's paymaster at Lucknow by Charles Smith, Lucknow, 1786 (David Cotton Collection)*

46 *An Indian girl reclining on a rug and a cushion, presumably the bibi of an Englishman living in Dacca by Francesco Renaldi, Dacca, 1789.*

bibis riding elephants. William Frazer, the British Commissioner, who was murdered in 1835 in Delhi, had seven Indian wives who lived together some distance away from Delhi. His favourite bibi was Sarwan, a Jat woman, whose "delicate beauty was beyond compare". Then there was Col. John Collins, nick-named "King Collins", the Resident at the Scindhia's camp. He loved pomp and show, and went about everywhere accompanied by his zenana and a private artillery brigade. An Englishman, Meadows Taylor of Sholapur, had a harem of native beauties. All his girls competed with each other to win his favour but he was particularly enchanted by a 15 year old Maratha girl. Contemporary observers have recorded that plurality of bibis did not create any problems as they lived together with tolerable cordiality.

There was no shame about these liaisons. Even the Governor General, Sir John Shore, and the Governor of Bombay and members of his Council, publicly had native women as their mistresses. These irregular unions attracted no censure. They were seldom a secret, as can be gathered from the account of the birth of Qui Hi's son, in the satiric poem "The Grand Master".

Poor Gulab was in that way,
That those who "love their lords" should be;
And in a week, to Qui Hi's joy,
Produced our youth a chopping boy.

Our hero now, without pretence,
Thought himself of some consequence;
A child he had got, and what was curious,
He knew the infant was not spurious;
For though Qui Hi was never tied
By licence to his Indian bride,
Yet he was confident that she
Had acted with fidelity.

The classic case is that of Job Charnock, founder of the city of Calcutta, who married a beautiful Brahmin girl, Leela, after rescuing her from a funeral pyre where she was going to perform 'Sati'. Legend has it that Charnock was madly in love with her and she persuaded the great sahib to live almost like a Hindu. We come across another case of romantic and perilous adventure of an English army officer who rescued a young and

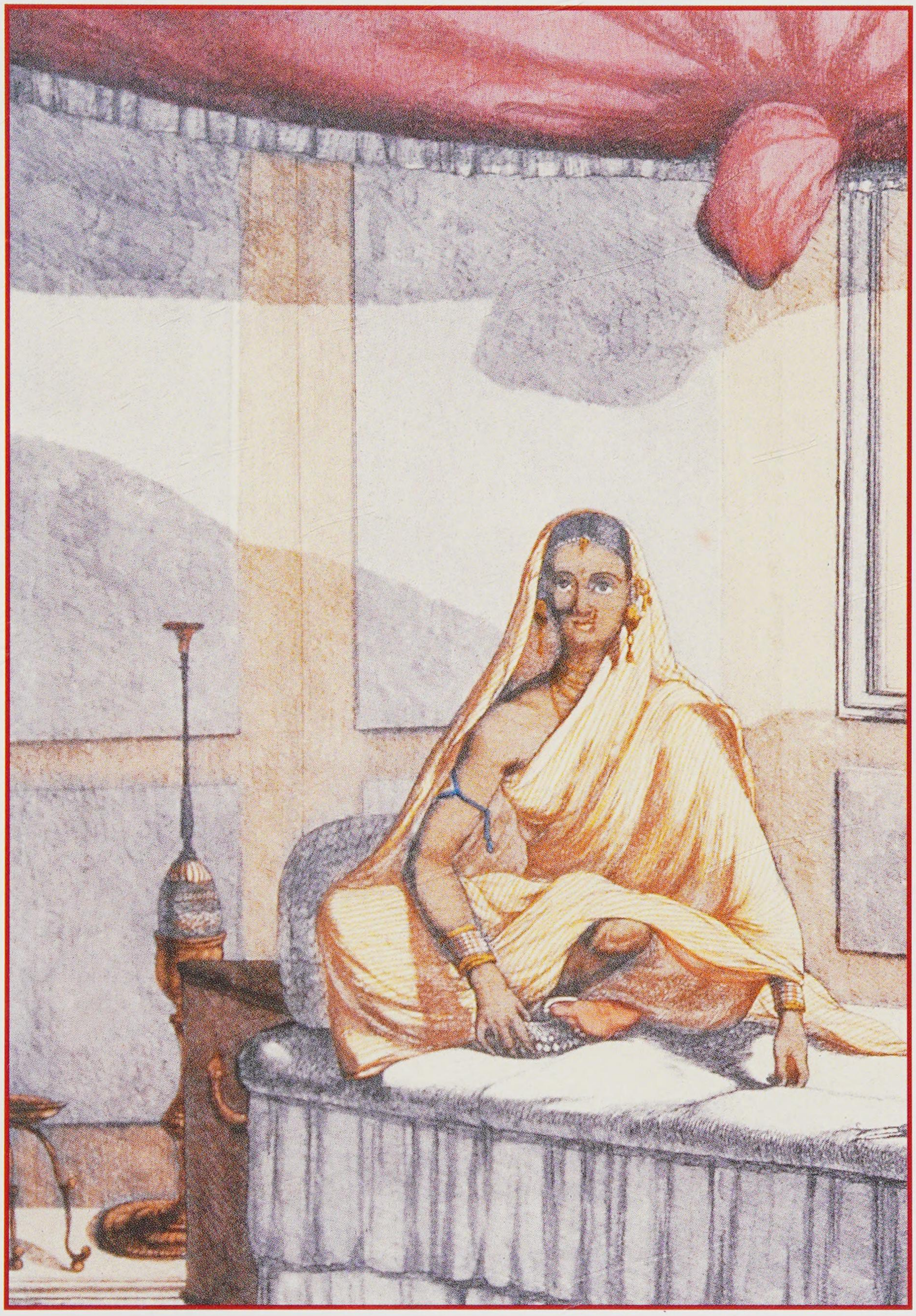
47 *Amber Kooer, a Rajput lady companion of Sir Charles Warre Malet, Resident at the Maratha Court in Poona by James Wales, Poona, 1792*

beautiful Brahmin widow at Rajamudary and took her in as his bibi. Another illustrious company official, Francis Day, proved his deep attachment to his bibi by choosing a site for the fort in Madras in 1639 which was close to her place.

Contemporary paintings depict the intimacy and closeness between the sahib and his Indian bibi. William Hickey, a famous attorney and socialite of Calcutta, in 1780-90's has left a touching account of his attachment to his bibi, Jemdanee, which is as striking as the British artist, Thomas Hickey's aesthetic portrait of this charming and dignified lady. 'Jemdanee', William Hickey wrote, "lived with me, respected and admired by all friends for her extraordinary sprightliness and great humour. Unlike the women in Asia, she never secluded herself from the sight of strangers; on the contrary, she delighted in joining my male parties, cordially joining in the mirth which prevailed though never touching wine or spirits of any kind". He also extols her "as gentle and affectionately attached a girl, as ever man was blessed with". Jemdanee was a great favourite with Hickey's friends who gave her presents and sent her affectionate messages. Two of them, Bob Pott and Col. Cooper, also had faithful bibis. Another distinguished sahib with Indian bibis was General William Palmer, who lived with an aristocratic Muslim lady, Begum Faiz Bakhsh, a member of the Delhi royal house, and a second bibi, a princess of Oudh. In his will Palmer bequeathed his house to her and referred to her as "Bibi Faiz Bakhsh Saheba who has been my affectionate friend and companion during a period of more than 35 years (1781-1816)".

Away from the conventional life of the Presidency towns, Lucknow, with its distinctive culture, attracted several outstanding company officials, soldiers and merchants. Among the notables were Colonel Claude Martin, John Wombell and Colonel Antoine Polier. James Achilles Kirkpatrick, Resident of Hyderabad (1797-1805), married Khair-un-Nissa Begum, niece of the Prime Minister of the Nizam, Mir Alam. Then we have Thomas Alexander Cobbe, a senior Company official, who married a high - ranking Muslim lady, Nease Begum, strictly, in accord with Muslim custom. A marriage contract, *mahr nameh* was drawn up and properly witnessed. It states that the dowry was "eight thousand Sicca Rupees" and the marriage was legal and lawful. In a touching reference to his wife in his will he stated,"I have never for a moment regretted our union except inasmuch as the future

48 *Woman of distinction, presumably the bibi of a Sahib by F .B. Solvyns, Calcutta, c.1790*



of our children has created anxiety (and) wish her to have the consolation of knowing the feelings I have always entertained towards her". Col Hyder Hearsey and Col. William Gardner were military freelancers who married adopted daughters of the Mughal Emperor. Fanny Parks noted that the Gardeners mixed freely with the Mughal aristocracy and lived as they pleased and did not bother about their being accepted by the British society in India.

The most striking case of a bibi, excelling her own European protector, was that of Begum Samru nee'Zeb-uṇ-Nissa. From the lowly rank of a nautch girl, she rose to be a Begum by marrying Walter Reinhart, a military officer, popularly known as Samru. She inherited his Jagir at Sardhana after his death. The John Company made her independent ruler on her promise of loyalty. The Begum was an exotic figure who offered lavish entertainment to British visitors at her estate. She, however, earned notoriety through cruelty, intrigues and autocratic actions.

There was one more group of Englishmen who took to an Indian life style. Artists who came to this country in the late 18th and 19th centuries looked for patrons amongst native princes and nawabs. They found it convenient to adopt local customs and preferred to live with Indian bibis. Tilly Kettle, the first British portrait painter, was one of them. George Beechy had two, or possibly three, bibis. Francesco Renaldi, another British artist, made quite a few portraits of Indian bibis, one of which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1791. Bibis are shown as shy, modest, calm and composed. They appear in a reflective mood, wearing shimmering costumes and rich jewellery.

Many of these irregular unions of the sahibs with bibis were considered respectable. The will of Henry Littleton, a company official, testifies to the virtues of his bibi, a Brahmin woman, called Raja, whom he had willed all his property and possessions. Then we have the case of General John Pater who was so fond of his bibi, that he built a church over her grave when the chaplain refused to bury her in the cemetry.

Richard Burton, wrote in his autobiography that Indian mistresses were a regular feature of British military life. In 1840, there was hardly an officer in Baroda, who was not more or less, tied to a Hindu woman. These irregular unions were mostly temporary under an agreement and ceased when the regiment left the station. But in many cases, the mistresses followed the

49 *A Mohammedan lady presenting a rose to her lord by William Daniell, c. 1829*

regiment and lived with their protectors for many years and bore children to them. At times, it was stipulated that there were to be no children. This was complied with; the women had an almost infallible recipe to prevent pregnancy.

Bibis and mistresses were left behind when the sahibs returned home. It was a moving sight when they stood with their children on the river bank bidding farewell to their protectors as the vessel bore them away. The pathos of such a parting finds expression in a contemporary ballad sung by an Indian woman:

Tis thy will and I must leave thee,
O thou best beloved farewell
I forbear lest I should greive thee,
Half my heart felt pangs to tell.
Soon a British fair will charm thee,
Thou alas her smiles must woo,
But tho' she to rapture warm thee
Don't forget thy poor Hindoo.

Some women authors wrote about the jealousy of native women and warned young men going to India to keep away from them. Mrs. Mary Martha Sherwood, a prolific author of stories, with religious content, even claimed that "many an Englishwife lost her life from the jealousy of native favourites". On the other hand, it is also recorded that when a sahib married a white woman, the erstwhile bibi or mistress, even after years of absence, showed respectful attachment to the memsahib and her children.

By the third decade of the 19th century, with the introduction of the overland route as well as steamships, English girls started coming to India in large numbers to hunt for husbands. The practice of keeping bibis and native mistresses came to be frowned upon; Englishmen were advised to distance themselves from native connections. The memsahibs launched a full scale campaign against "bibidom". They spared no effort to abolish the 'bibi' system, as they considered it, a threat to their position and scandalous for the ruling class. Thus, thousands of contented bibis, loving and good mothers, were driven out of their homes. After the mutiny of 1857 the institution of keeping Indian women as bibis nearly disappeared.

Public Entertainers

50 *Above: Nautch girl in a dancing pose by Mrs. S. C Belnos, c. 1820*

Among the public entertainers, the nautch girls held a pre-eminent position. Highly proficient in the art of singing and dancing, with a tradition spanning centuries behind them, they provided the most popular entertainment to the people. "Delicate in person, soft in her features, perfect in form", the nautch girl captivated the hearts of the ordinary Englishmen by her grace and charm, enthralled the more sophisticated among them by her conversation and wit and enraptured the elite with her song and dance which some of them found "superior to all operas of the world".

Professional nautch girls and their performances find mention in several journals and memoirs of European travellers, Company officials and the missionaries. Some of the fun-loving post-Plassey English "nabobs" who made big fortunes during short period of stay in India followed the ostentatious life style of the native princes and omrahs and some of them even maintained their private troupes of nautch girls and musicians for the entertainment of their guests. It was not unusual for them to select one of the girls as a temporary mistress on a salary. The nautch girls, at times, left their troupes to become long-time consorts of the wealthy sahibs.

A dinner in the English community was, usually, followed by a nautch performance. So were the festive occasions such as the King Emperor's birthdays and the visits of dignitaries to civil and military stations. The nautch girls would also accompany the British troops when they moved, providing them entertainment en-route. They were sometimes engaged to welcome the arriving guests on the highways. An officer recorded in his journal (1783) that he was received by a group of nautch girls who encircled his palanquin, dancing until he reached the house of his host, Major MacNeal in Arcot. So popular was this entertainment, especially, with the soldiers, that the nautch girls began to move en masse to British stations. Capt. Williamson noted in his *Costumes and Customs of India* (1813) that, between the years 1778 and 1785, the prime sets of dancing girls moved from their native quarters to the cantonments, where they were received with open arms. According to him, the celebrated nautch girl, Kaunum, was then at "the zenith of her glory". Despite her homely looks, "she held in complete subjection and rendered absolute tributary, many scores of fine young British officers".

51 *An acrobat performing Egg-dance, engraving from* India and its Native Princes' *by Louis Rousselet, c. 1860.*

Quite often, the lonely sahibs invited nautch girls to entertain them at their homes. It was also common for groups of civilians or soldiers to pool their resources and hire nautch girls for an evening of amusement. Memsahibs also attended the nautch parties, but it was men who got into the spirit of the nautch. Encouraged by their applause of *wah wah*, the nautch girls would shed their stiff reserve and cool propriety, to captivate the audience by their alluring charm and grace. In the presence of ladies, the dance performance was said to be a dull and decorous affair.

The quality of the 'nautch' and the class to which the nautch girls belonged varied from place to place as did the impressions of British spectators. James Forbes in his, *Oriental Memories* (1813) describes the nautch girls as "extremely delicate in their person, soft and regular in their features, with form of perfect symmetry, and although dedicated from infancy to this profession, they in general preserve a decency and modesty in their demeanour, which is more likely to allure than the shameless effrontery of similar characters in other countries".

52 *Two nautch girls performing with musicians by John Luard, c. 1830*

In a similar vein Capt. Bellew (1843) portrayed the nautch girls as "pretty gazelle-eyed damsels arrayed in robes of skyblue, crimson and gold in stately guise whose languishing glances stare bright through their antimonial borders". Capt Robert Smith (1828-33) makes a distinction between different classes of nautch girls and has a word of praise even for the lowliest of them for their simple and graceful attitudes and modest attire. At that time, Nicki was easily the most celebrated nautch girl of Calcutta and is mentioned in a number of contemporary accounts of nautch parties where the British gentry was invited. She was known to be quite wealthy and charged

53 *Nautch girl from Lucknow performing before a group of English gentlemen by Sir Charles D'oyly, Calcutta, c. 1810*

54 *Dancing girl of Udaipur by William Carpenter, C. 1853*

a thousand rupees for her performance. Emma Roberts, a literary celebrity of 1830s, describes her as the prima donna of the East and the Catalani of Hindustan. Sir Charles D'oyly, a versatile Company official, compliments Nicki in the following verses (1828):

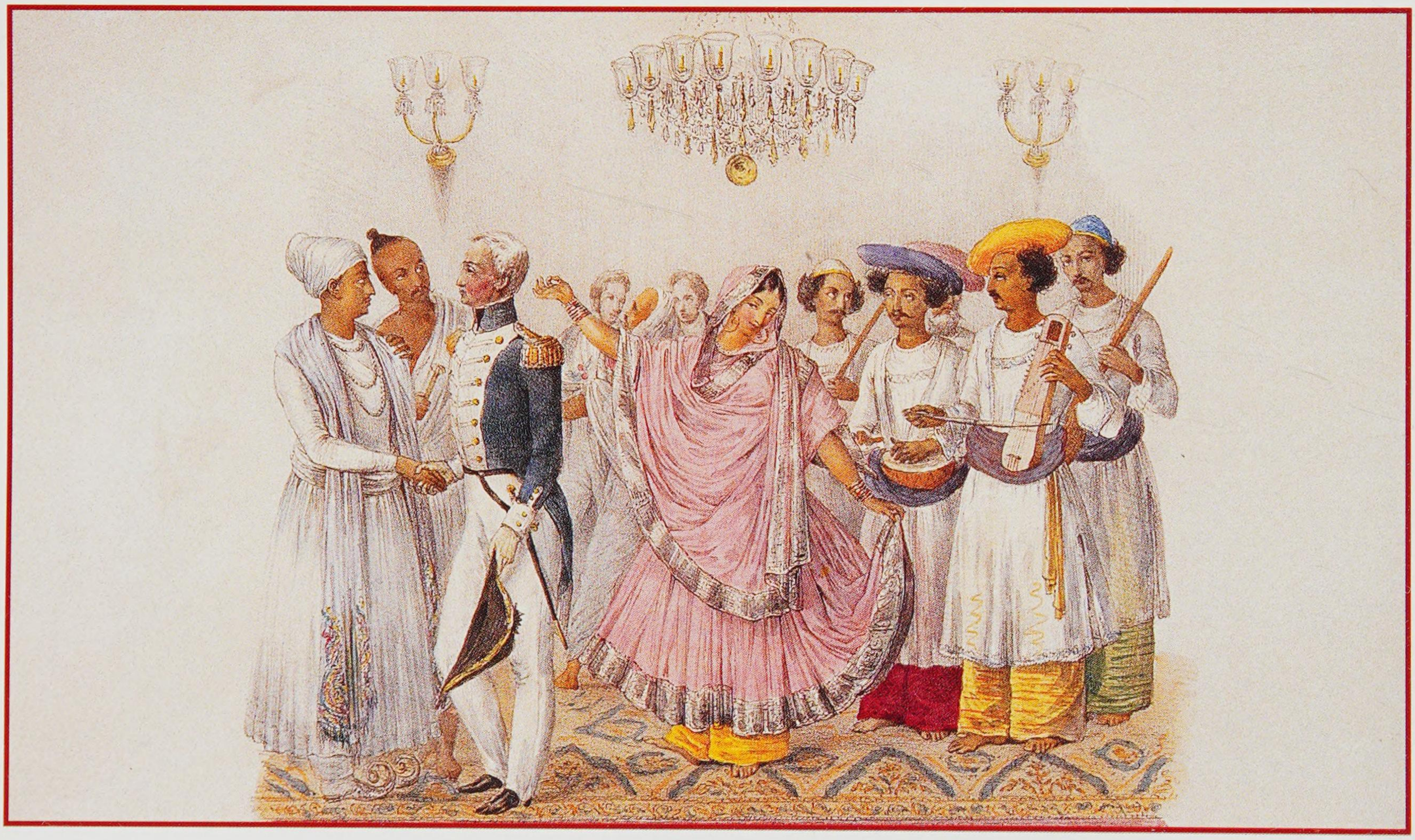
But hark, at Nickie's voice— such, one ne'er hears
From squalling nautchness, straining their shrill throats
In natural warblings, how it greets our ears,
And brilliant jingling of delicious notes,
Like nighingale's that through the forest floats:

A contemporary of Nicki who dominated the nautch scene in Delhi, was the renowned Alfina,who was much in demand and was invited to perform by the English sahibs as well as by the nobility of Delhi. Capt. Mundy in his journal expresses great admiration for this pretty, dusky Alfina who "like Calypso among her maidens greatly excelled her fellows in stature, beauty and grace". Her melodious singing, graceful movements and gestures were admired even after her charms had somewhat faded. The dress and ornaments in which she danced were said to be worth Rs. 40,000, the most remarkable being her nose ring, which was studded with diamonds and emeralds.

Then there was Mahtab (Moonbeam) - the celebrated nautch girl from Sind. The famous Sir Richard Burton calls her "Donna of Larkhana" and eloquently describes her beauty and accomplishments. A perfect beauty with a perfect face, "the gloss of youth is in her hair and marble like transparent skin — mouth, eyebrows, eyelashes, all look new, unused fresh as the day they were finished by the hand of nature". He becomes poetic in describing her dance,: "Mahatab floats forward so softly that trace of exertion is imperceptible; slowly waving her white arms, she unexpectedly stands close to you, then turning with a pirouette, she sinks back, retires, and stands motionless as waxwork, and then again all *da copo*, with a beautiful sameness that becomes her face and figure".

There is a facinating account of nautch by charming Kashmiri girls in Shalimar Gardens bedecked with torches. William Simpson, a British artist, was so much enthralled by the spectacle that he describes it as "the sweet delusion of a never to be forgotten night". "The Peris of Paradise"

55 *Nautch entertainmer by Mansingh in honour of Lord Clyde, the C-in -C by Egron Lundgren, Lucknow, 1859*



56 *Top: A Kashmiri nautch girl asleep by William Carpenter, c.1855*
57 *Above: A nautch during the Puja festival at the house of a Hindu Raja with European guests by Mrs S. C. Belnos, Calcutta, c.1820*

he adds "were not a matter of faith; they were realities before us".

In South India, devadasis attached to the temples were the professional dancers. The profession was hereditary and in many cases a marriage of a devadasi was performed to a deity, or a man from the dancers' caste or even to a sacred tree. But the ceremony entailed no obligation as applied to the real married women. Devadasis invited by the sahibs to entertain them were also called, nautch girls. Dr. Shortt in his account (1870) describes the different classes of devadasis, their customs, manners, lifestyle and performances. He found them "very goodlooking with large sparkling eyes, regular features and an intelligent pleasing appearance". He was, particularly, struck by the grace and charm of Telugu dancing girls and narrates an episode concerning a medical officer, who handled a delivery case without his instruments, but with the help of a dancing girl, whose beautiful small hands and little taper fingers were made to act the part of a pair of forceps.

58 *Nautch girl of Ulwar, engraving from* 'India and its Native Princes' *by Louis Rousselet, c. 1860*

The most distinguished devadasi of that age was Muddupalani a talented scholar and poet, of Tanjore. She wrote *Radhika Santwanam* (Appeasing Radha), a literary masterpiece, that won her great fame and recognition in mid eighteenth century. In this marvellous erotic epic, Muddupalani, highlights woman's aggressive role in making love. It is her sexual gratification that is the central theme of her work. She was easily the only Indian woman to have written so boldly and candidly about a sensual theme. When this work was published in the late 19th century, it was attacked as obscene and the British Government, keen on protecting the moral health of its subjects, banned it in 1911. It was

59 *Indian nautch girl by Egron Lundgren, Lucknow, 1859*

60 *Dancing girls and musicians by James Forbes, Cambay, 1781*

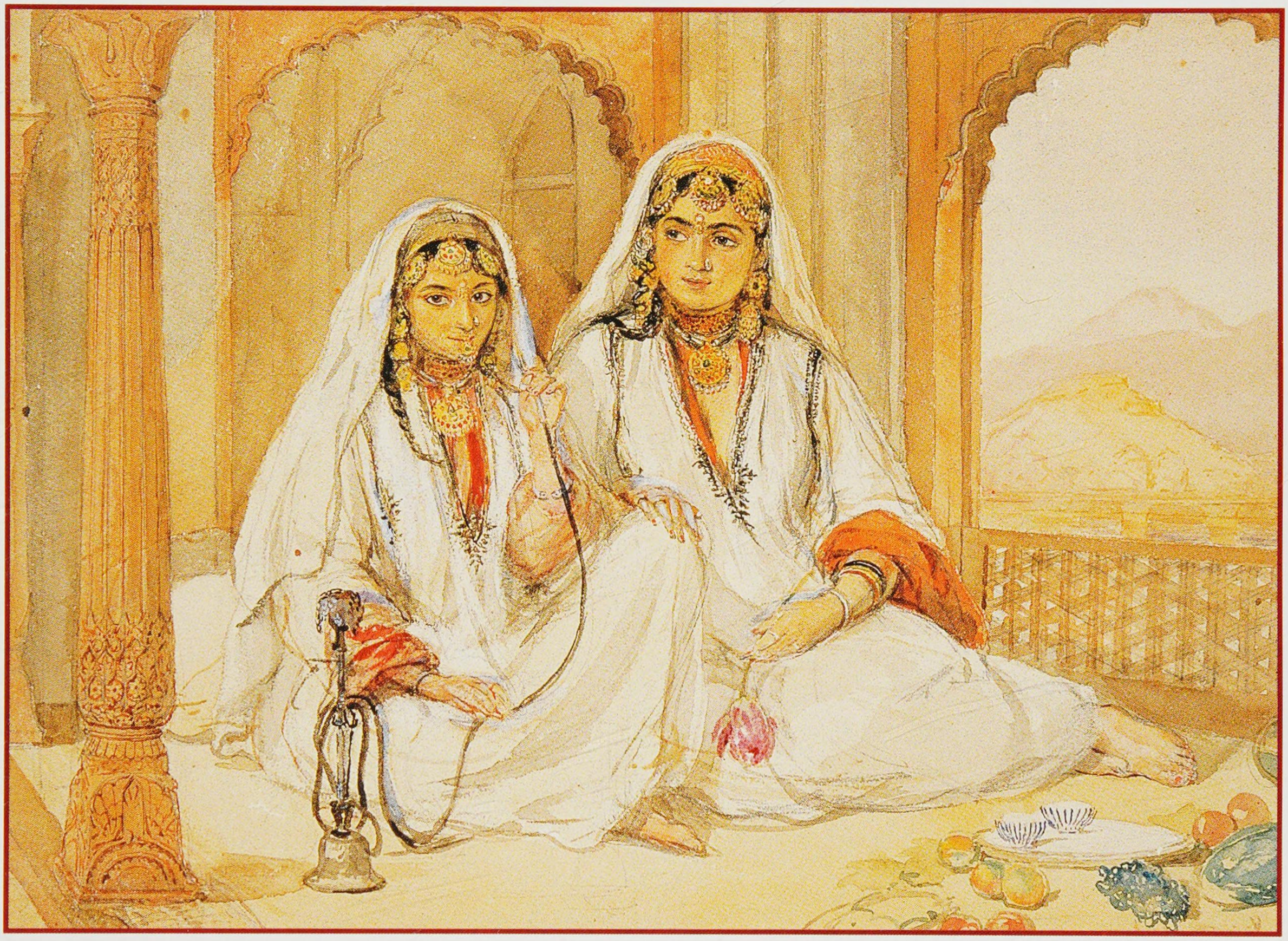
only after independence, in 1947, that the ban was withdrawn.

In their dress and attire, the nautch girls put on gorgeous costumes embellished with heavy gold work and embroidery. Their dress was, however, modesty itself and nothing but their faces, feet and hands were exposed. The *orhni* or *dupatta* (veil) was the most graceful part of the costume. Their *ungeah* (bodice), which was of varied texture and decor, was made to fit the bust. It was fastened at the back with silken cords. According to a mid 18th century account by John Grose, the nautch girls had perfected a peculiar mode of preserving the shape of their breasts. They enclosed them in a pair of perfectly fitting hollow cups or cases of very light wood linked together and buckled at the back. Being smooth and supple, the cases played freely with every motion of the body and did not crush the exquisitely tender texture of the flesh in that part like the stiff whalebone stays in use among the Europeans. Their outside covering was thin gold or silver plate studded with stones or gems. This composed the richest part of their dress.

European spectators were greatly impressed by the glittering robes and ornaments worn by the nautch girls. Sir Charles D'oyly was charmed by their variety as is evident from the following extract from his long poem.

An ample robe of fine transparent muslin
Encircling their slight forms, dependent flows,
Over silken trowsers, hanging loose and rustling,
That scarce a little naked foot expose.
Then, from the head-down to the very toes,
A cobweb veil descends in many a fold.
These, you may say, are curious kinds of clothes,
Trimmed with deep borders of refulgent gold,
Which now they droop and now, fantastically hold.

What shall we say of nose encircling rings,
or the rich pendants of the loaded ear,
Armlets and all those curious sorts of things
That Indian females on their persons bear?
But chief the bells they round their ankles wear,



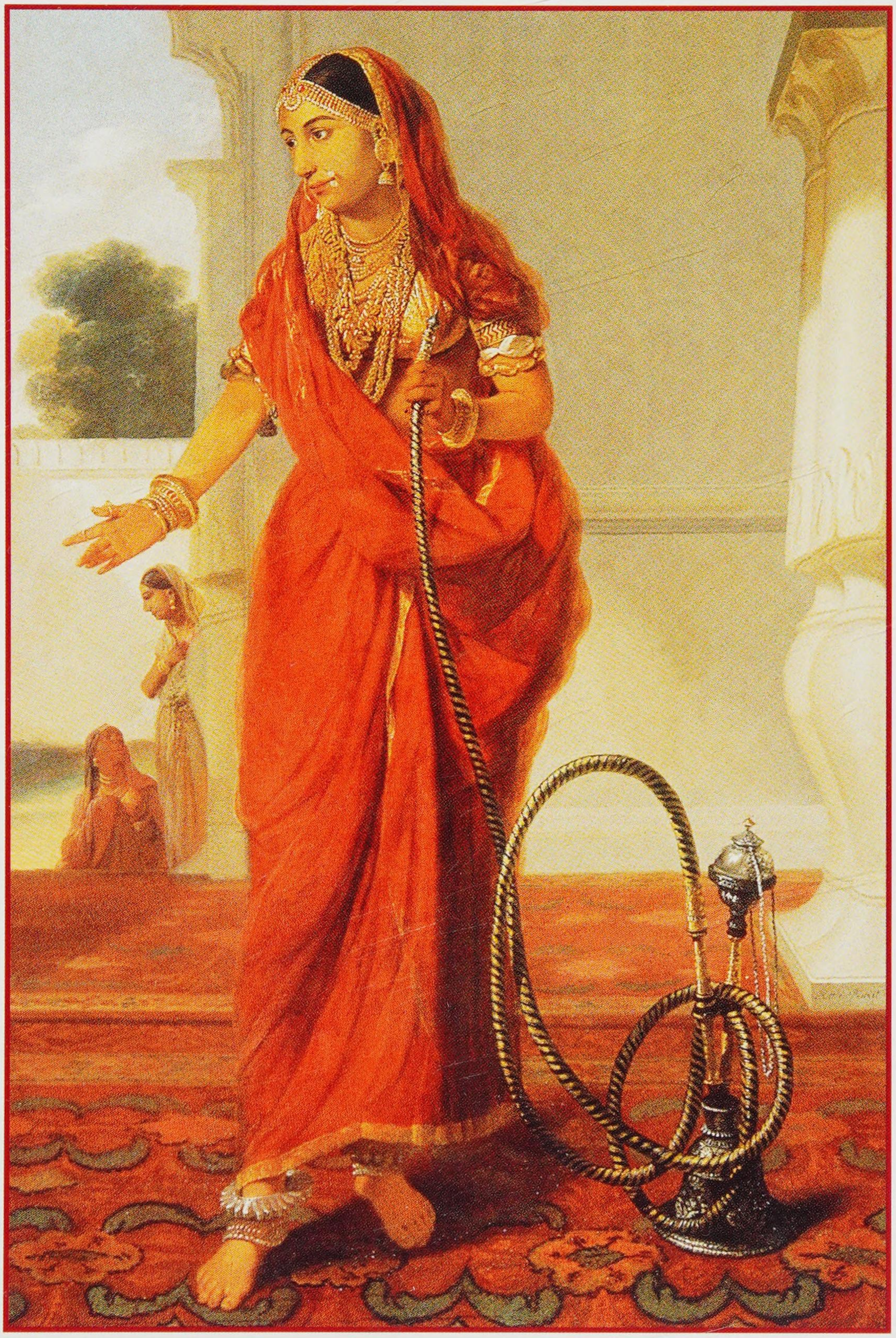
61 *Kashmiri nautch girls by William Carpenter, Srinagar, c. 1855*

That to the motion of their well made feet,
Jingle in cadence to the native air,
and mark the time - now solemn and now fleet,
As on the echoing floor they tremulously beat?

As for the make-up, they tinted their finger-tips, palms of the hand, toes and soles of the feet with henna. The lips were stained a deeper red and powdered saffron was used to add a golden hue to the skin. Among the marks of beauty much appreciated were the dimple on the cheeks and the black dot at the most precise spot on the face. The interior edges of the eyelids were rubbed with *soorma* (antimony powder) and the eye-lashes and brows were darkened with *'Kajal'* (lamp black) which served to accentuate the size of the eyes and gave them a languishing softness and a lustrous appearance. Sometimes, the skin at the corner of the eyes, was cut in childhood to increase their length and give them more room to display wantonness by the rolling of the eyes.

There was a class of entertainers, belonging to itninerant bands, who practised dance not as an art, but, as a subterfuge to promote their vocation of prostitution. They served a section of patrons who, they found, were more interested in them as an object of pleasure than in their dance. They were often engaged by the John Company's ordinary soldiers and civilians for an evening's amusement. In a description of the seductive dances by these parties of strolling dancing girls, Innes Munro (1789) observes that "they accompany the music with amorous songs and palpitation or heaving of the bosom calculated to excite in the spectators corresponding desires. In this they are generally very successful, continuing their lascivious gesture till by the force of imagination and the heat of exercise, they become almost frantic with ecstasy and sink down in the most inviting attitudes, motionless with fatigue... The conclusion of the scene it is unnecessary to describe. Where the passions rage in their utmost violence, such opportunities for indulgence are not to be lost". On such occasions, the host would ask his guests to choose their partners for the night. It was evidently this category of women passing as nautch girls, whom some European visitors and travellers described as prostitutes.

Another set of women who entertained the upperclass womenfolk in



62 *Dancing girl loaded with ornaments by Tilly Kettle, Faizabad, 1772*

the Zenana were included in the permanent establishment of the harems of Indian princes and nobles. They would relate stories and fables to their mistresses when the latter were composing themselves to sleep. Many of their tales had a romantic cast. The women singers, on the other hand, amused the ladies with folk songs and even sensual poems. They also played on the musical instruments like sitar, sarangi and drums. In Bengal, the women singers entertaining the upperclass women were noted for their expression of sensuality and eroticism. The tradition of using the Radha-Krishan story as a vehicle for voicing women's desires continued well into the 19th century. But with the spread of western education, the upcoming urban gentry drove them out of the Zenana.

Then there were the tumbling women. They were quite distinct from the dancers. They joined the bands of itinerant jugglers and acrobats, the popular street performers of the time. They displayed different types of feats and manual skills. The French traveller, Louis Rousselet, was enchanted by the young and beautifully formed woman, presenting an egg-dance. She carried on her head a wicker wheel round which threads were attached with slip knots, kept open by means of a glass bead. She began whirling round to the rhythm of music and at each turn, placed an egg in a loop until the eggs formed a horizontal halo. She repeated the process and without breaking them withdrew each one of them as she continued whirling.

The physical strength displayed by some women was equally dazzling. Dr. Fryer saw a woman who held nine gilded balls on play with her hands and feet and the muscles of her arms and legs, for a long time together, without letting them fall. J.D. Gay, the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent who accompanied the Prince of Wales in 1875 to India, speaks about a stout girl who threw a man weighting 11 stones over her shoulders, then seizing him, once more placed him crossways on her back and then tossed him into the air as though he were made of feathers and not a broad shouldered human being. Turning backwards on her feet, she picked up straws with the eyelids, threw somersaults and lifted weights, which would have astonished any London acrobat.

He also witnessed young girls rolling themselves into balls, tying themselves into knots, and going through a bewildering amount of dislocation, and while their eyes were bandaged, they threaded a needle with their toes.

Women at Work

63 *Above: Hindu women employed in beating rice by Capt. Charles Gold, c. 1790*

64 *Bengali woman holding a pitcher by Fredrick W. A. De Fabeck, c. 1860*

In practically every European household, a woman of particular importance was the ayah. She took care of the children and acted as the lady's maid. Well-to-do households had one ayah per child and some more, according to the need. Memsahibs would rather not bring up children and employed wet nurses or *amahs* for breast feeding of infants. Later, they switched from wet nurses to dry nurses and would continue to serve a family for many years.

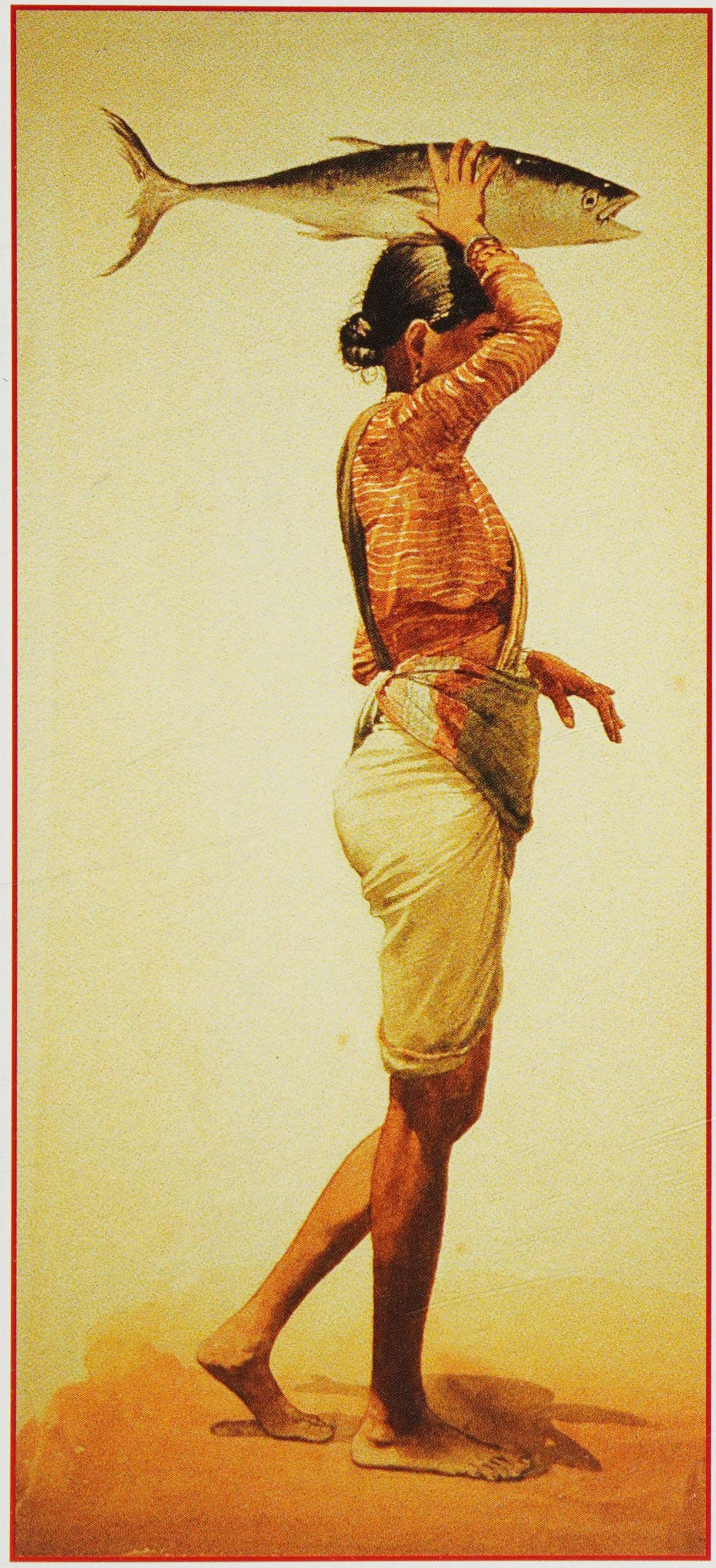
The ayahs were not only fond of children but were greatly attached to them as indeed the native women generally were. In loyalty and devotion they were considered superior to European nurses. On their return home, English families carried memories of their ayahs with them. The ayahs had narrated wonderful Indian stories and sung lulluabies. A favourite rhyme that ayahs sang which many never forgot was:

Nini Baba nini	Sleep, little one sleep.
Muckan roti chini	You shall have bread, butter and sugar,
Muckan roti hogiah	when bread and butter is done,
Chota Baba so giah	Little baby is fast asleep.

There is an amusing account in the *Anglo-Indian Domestic Sketchbook* (1849) about men trying to put a baby to bed as all the ayahs and maids were busy attending to the memsahib during her illness. The author writes: "We of the male creation had it to our lot a few nights to put Master Jimmy to his resting place, which we did after the manner practised under your roof of allowing sleep its natural and unsolicited course. But to our astonishment, the young gentleman sat himself in bed for about two hours, and amused us during that period by screaming, because as we afterwards found, he was not, as usual, sung, rubbed, shampooed, and in short, tickled to sleep!" The ayah was usually portrayed as a small plump woman with gleaming oiled hair in a white saree and blouse and covered with nose rings and bangles on her wrists. Gentle and sweet-natured, a good ayah was so dedicated to her work that she would never yield up her charge even for a few hours and if necessary sleep outside the door of children's room. If ayahs had a fault, it was that they spoilt the children, and they never said no to any demands made by their charge.

As a lady's maid, the ayah helped the memsahib dress and would brush

65 *A woman labourer by John Griffiths, Bombay, c. 1870*



66 *Above Left: A fisherwoman by John Griffiths, Bombay, c. 1870*
67 *Above Right: A woman of Maharashtra by John Griffiths, c. 1870*

68 *Above Left: A Muslim ayah in the dress usually worn by ayahs in Calcutta and carrying her child by Emily Eden, c. 1838*
69 *Above Right: A Parsee woman carrying water pots by J. B. Belassis, Bombay, c.1820*

70 *A Rajput woman's method of winnowing by Fredrick W. A. De Fabeck, c. 1860*

71 *Top: Brahminees washing and carrying water from Toombodra Hurryhurr. (MacKenzee Collection), c. 1800*
72 *Above: Women grinding flour by J. B. Belassis, c. 1850*

her hair. She would sit uptill late at night to take care of her mistress when she returned home from parties. As a friend to the mistress, she also acted as an informer and acquainted her with all the neighbourhood gossip. An author who had nothing but praise for her ayah noted: "She was most tender and careful, nursing me through several severe illnesses; never took the value of a pin's head from me and would, were I to return to India tomorrow, come back to me, if she were alive and serve me as faithfully". In addition to their monthly wages, the ayahs received gifts and *"bakhshish"* of money or tips on the festivals and New Year's Day. They usually spent the money they got on jewellery.

Another female servant in the household was the humble *"Mehturanee"* or sweeper woman, usually the *Mehtur's* wife, who cleaned the whole house. Even she has been described as clean in her dress and adorned, "possibly, by all those indescribable Asiatic charms which the glowing tint of sindoor (red lead or vermillion) centering the forehead, the sable pencillings of *soorma*, and *missee* (preparation of led, vitraol etc.) on eyelids and on teeth, and the sanguinary hue of the pan upon lips and gums, are of course, so highly calculated to create". Then there was the washerwoman or *dhoban* among the outdoor domestic help. While washing was done by her husband, the washerman, at a tank or a river bank, she would spread out the clothes on a line made of rope and iron the clothes.

Mrs. Marianne Postans, in her writings, reveals warmth and a highly friendly attitude to all classes of people. She was charmed by her washerwoman, Parabuti dhobun, and her portrayal is fascinating, if not poetic. "How musical has her voice sounded at the sunset hour, when surrounded by her young companions she has chanted her Mahratta songs, polishing her little lotas (tumblers) as she sang, while the blue saree, drooping on the neck, suffered some bright ray of light to fall on the shining tresses of her heavily braided hair, and the rich gold ornament and red pomegranate blossoms which formed its tasteful decoration".

Women on the farms put in herculean efforts to support their families. They collected the grain, harvested by men, winnowed it and then ground it with speed and skills inherited from one generation to the next. Mary Frances Billington, who made a pioneering study of female life in India in 1893-94, was impressed by these women. She wrote: "With a palm leaf tray, not unlike a housemaids' dustpan, and few shakes to and fro, the chaff or husk is easily separated from the grain, and one may see quite tiny girls thus

73 *Hindu women preparing fuel by Sir Charles D'oyly, c. 1820*

at work with hardly less speed than their mothers and grandmothers". As regards the process of grinding, it varied somewhat in different provinces but the most impressive and graceful modus operandi was adopted by Tamil women.

The most common occupation of women of all castes through centuries has been the spinning of cotton to supplement the family income and meet the needs of the family. Women also worked as potters, weavers, dyers, as part of the household team in occupations reserved for the lower castes. They went to markets to sell milk or milk products or vegetable oil used for lighting. They also made baskets, mats, nets etc. Collecting and selling fuel and fodder was yet one more task that devolved upon women.

Another female worker to catch the attention of the sahibs was the fisherwoman, carrying fish to the market. The man, bread-winner of the family went out to the sea and toiled on the shore, and later enjoyed his smoke while the wife ran the show. She was shrewd and drove hard bargains, a saleswoman par excellence. She was attractive with a trim figure and a smile on her lips. According to one observer, her dress was striking. "The skimpy mantle or saree is slung tight between the legs and over the upper thigh, so that every movement of limb and curve of figure shows in bold lines, as the fisherwoman carries her basket on her head to the crowded market. The fisherwomen wear on their right hand a silver bracelet of peculiar and heavy shape such as is worn by no other caste. No other bangle or bracelet or jewel is worn on that hand: and the absence of such adornments is for them a sign of the covenant under which God protects his fishers from the perils of the deep". The freedom and strength the fishermen drew from the ocean manifested itself in their women enjoying a reasonable degree of independence, and certain amount of liberty. Unlike other communities, the marriages, among the fisherfolk were seldom arranged too early. The fisherman was usually expected to be at least twenty, fit and sturdy to go out to the sea. It was quite common for the parents to consult their daughter about her suitor. Widow remarriage was acceptable and divorce was permitted only if a woman was proved to be engaged in adultery.

The Europeans were impressed by the creative handicrafts of the women of the Banjara tribe. The Banjaras were a nomadic group who had been singing and dancing to the tune of a one string instrument, *Ektara*, in Kutch and Rajasthan, for centuries. They sold silver and gold ornaments studded

with handcrafted mirrors, fashioned by their women. The Banjara women wore a skirt and top with a uniform pattern with red and green embroidery. Their metallic ornaments had cut mirrors, old coins and seashells. The Banjara women enjoyed a status in their tribe, better than most Indian women. Unfortunately in 1871, the Banjaras were listed as a criminal tribe under the law and their free and nomadic life style was stifled. But they still continue roaming in some parts of North India with their carved carts pulled by bullocks. They settle by the roadside at "camps" for weeks in winter and are known to be skilled blacksmiths. Their dark features are sharp and in spite of nomadic hardships, there is glow on their faces.

There was another class of women who were skilled in astrology and fortune telling. They were described as enchanters, diviners and charmers. These "wise" women were supposed to have great powers and made their living by giving advice to young people about their matters of the heart "especially on the jealousy, revenge and other passions prevalent in the zenana". They also supplied herbal preparations, amulets and charms to lovesick swains, to achieve their heart's desire. James Forbes narrates an incident of a young native woman who tried to recapture her one-time English lover with these devices but with no luck. Burton speaks of somewhat similar class of women in Sindh who were called *Kutni* (procuresses). He describes how these old women practised their calling. The lovelorn man would take an appointment with the Kutni and give full particulars about himself and the fair dame he wanted to meet. It was after much persuasion and payment of hefty fees to her that she agreed to make a try. Afterwards, if properly paid, she allowed the parties to meet at her house and managed their meetings time and again. It was a very lucrative profession, but not a safe one, since the Kutni was exposed to severe punishment if discovered by the husband. These old women were also accused of many actions of gross villainy, such as administering narcotics, preventives and abortives, and practising unholy rites, in order to subjugate the will of their victims.

Women as industrial workers appeared on the scene only towards the end of the 19th century with the setting up of cotton mills. Custom and social norms separated male and female labour in Indian mills. Women usually worked in a separate department with a forewoman in-charge. Their appearance and holiday apparel showed that they were neither poor nor overworked.

Women in Marriage

74 *Above: A native family by Sir Charles D'oyly, c. 1820*

75 *A native bride by Mortimer Menpes, c. 1890*

Travel writers of the 17th century fantasized about the 'incontinent' desires women of the harems had, while others were struck by the way religion and sex were mixed. Strange, unfounded tales of ceremonies Hindu women indulged in surprised them. In some cases, Indian women were depicted as dangerously exciting with expertise in occult sexual practices. This fanciful image of India, created through bizarre oriental tales carried home by travellers, is represented in a popular work of fiction *THE ENGLISH ROGUE* by Richard Head, published in 1665. A part of the book is about India and concentrates on sexual encounters and strange sexual practices prevalent in this country. These were based on senseless imaginary accounts of early travellers. Known for its wealth and riches, India was also treated as a playground for sexual fantasy.

It is from 18th century onwards, that we have more authentic accounts of the Indian social and cultural life. They provide interesting information about Indian women and their customs and manners. The Indian wife is portrayed as an embodiment of perfection. Her character was beyond reproach and she was the model of Eastern chastity. John Grose, in his journal dismisses the bragging of some Europeans about their successes with Hindu women.

The custom of early marriages, prevalent everywhere in the country, was strongly condemned by many writers. It was even noted that this evil practice was like an immense moral ulcer, 'palpable and revolting' leading to national deterioration. Some of them attributed it to the hot climate which helped early development of mental and physical faculties. Robert Orme, a British historian writes (1861): "Nature seems to have showered beauty on the fairer sex throughout Indostan (sic), with a more lavish hand than in most other countries. They are all, without exception fit to be married before thirteen, and wrinkled before thirty–flowers of too short a duration not to be delicate; and too delicate to last long". Whatever be the truth in this observation, it was a common practice to solemnize the marriage of a girl at quite a premature age even though the marriage was never consummated until the girl had attained puberty.

Among Hindus, the marriage of a daughter was regarded as sacred duty, because of the strong belief that a woman could not enter

76 *A sepoy's wife at Barrackpur by Egron Lundgren c. 1858*

heaven without marriage, no matter how virtuous she might be. She was taught that life without marriage was incomplete. Marriage was to her more than an incident; it was rather the foundation of a new life infact, a new life itself. It was her career, her profession, her study, her joy, her everything. Her foremost duty was maternity for which she had been sent into the world, and when fulfilled she was entitled to the best happiness in this life and the next. The sole sanctifier of her union with her man was the resulting child.

Polygamy was recognized as lawful and practised by the nobility and the rich, but the common man lived as husband of one wife. According to one observer, "not one man in ten can afford to maintain more than one wife and not one in ten of those who can afford it, will venture upon a sea of troubles in taking a second if he has a child by the first". Even where the rich elite had concubines and mistresses, great was the power of the wife behind the curtain which she exercised through her deep attachment and unstinted devotion to her husband.

In Bengal, the practice of polygamy had assumed scandalous proportions under 'kulinism'. Parents of lower castes married their daughters to one Brahmin to enhance the family status, while daughters of Brahmin parents were offered to a Kulin husband to preserve the dignity of the family which opposed the idea of unequal marriages. A Kulin Brahmin was marriageable at any age and some Brahmins, could boast of as many as sixty wives, and eight or ten was a moderate estimate. They were also free from the encumbrance of maintaining them. They had just to visit them at their fathers in-law's places'. This practice created problems for the progeny and led to other social evils. The system was finally discarded by the efforts of the social reformers in the 19th century and by the spread of education among girls.

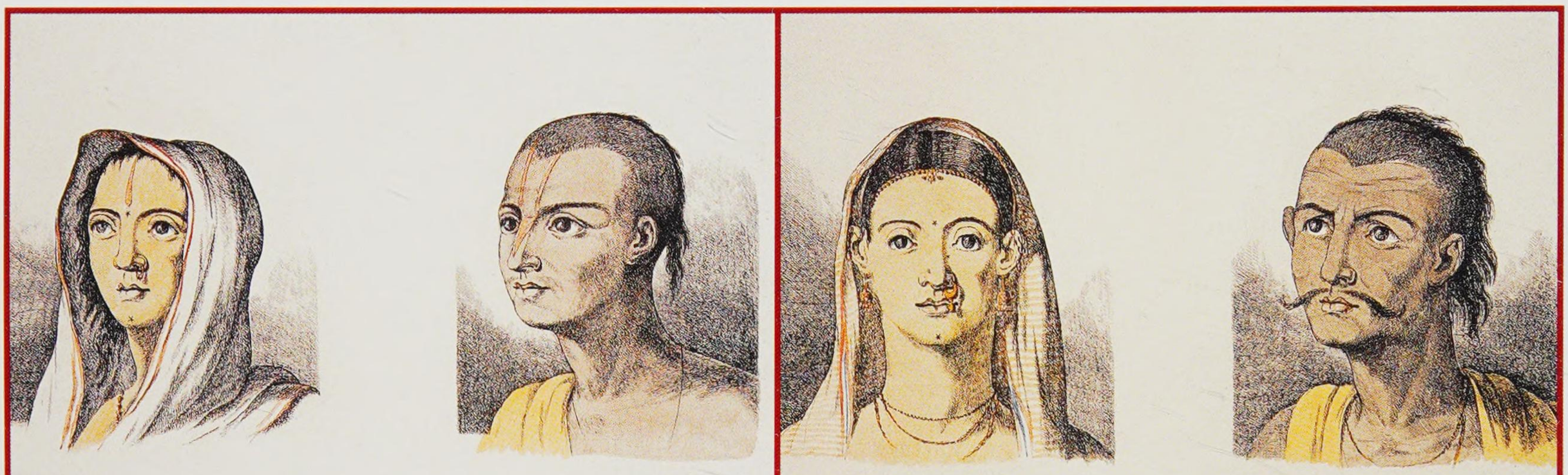
Mrs. Ali writes about the plurality of wives and life in the Zenana. "A good wife is usually tolerant of such arrangements. She receives her husband with undisguised pleasure. The good and forbearing wife, by this line of conduct secures to herself the confidence of her husband... he can speak of other wives without restraint - for she knows he has others - and her education has taught her that they

deserve her respect in proportion as they contribute to her husband's happiness".

On the other hand, Fanny Parks, who managed to have access to the Zenana, considered the plurality of wives a curse that caused the greatest misery for all concerned. She noted that co-wives, naturally hated one another most cordially and quarrelled all the time. She describes the Zenana as a place of intrigue and substantiates this statement by quoting oriental proverbs such as "A contemporary wife though a *Hoori* is worse than a she-devil" and "The malice of fellow-wife is notorious as she is intolerable even in effigy". Referring to reports in some instances of remarkable generosity in the conduct of good wives, Fanny Parks interpreted it to mean that "a good wife provides new wives to her husband".

Most foreign observers in their accounts bear testimony to the Indian wives' true attachment and devotion to their husbands. Even the custom of Sati symbolized their supreme sacrifice for the love of their husbands. As a rule, widows whether Hindu or Muslim, conducted themselves with dignity and honoured the memory of their husbands. There is an episode narrated by Forbes about a young Company official's encounter with a Mughal widow of distinction, who was being dispossessed of her estate and property, through the machinations of her relatives. To save her from such chicanery, the Englishman investigated the entire case. When he was able to ascertain the true position, he restored the lady her fortune. The lady felt greatly obliged. To express her gratitude to her benefactor, she sought an interview. The young Englishman, conversant with Persian, was conducted to her magnificent mansion where he was served with sherbet, fruits and offered a hookah. The attendants withdrew on the approach of their mistress. "Richly dressed and closely veiled, she entered the living room graciously. From an overflowing grateful heart, she commenced an interesting conversation and presented an *ottah* of roses and a valuable jewel. She seemed hurt at his refusal. Young and thoughtless, he made a transition from the brilliant gem, to her antelope eyes sparking through the veil; and from a momentary impulse, requested if he might behold a countenance irradiated by her superior mind. Unwilling to deny the only favour he seemed

77 A Mahrattan lady by Sir Charles D'oyly, c. 1820



Clockwise:

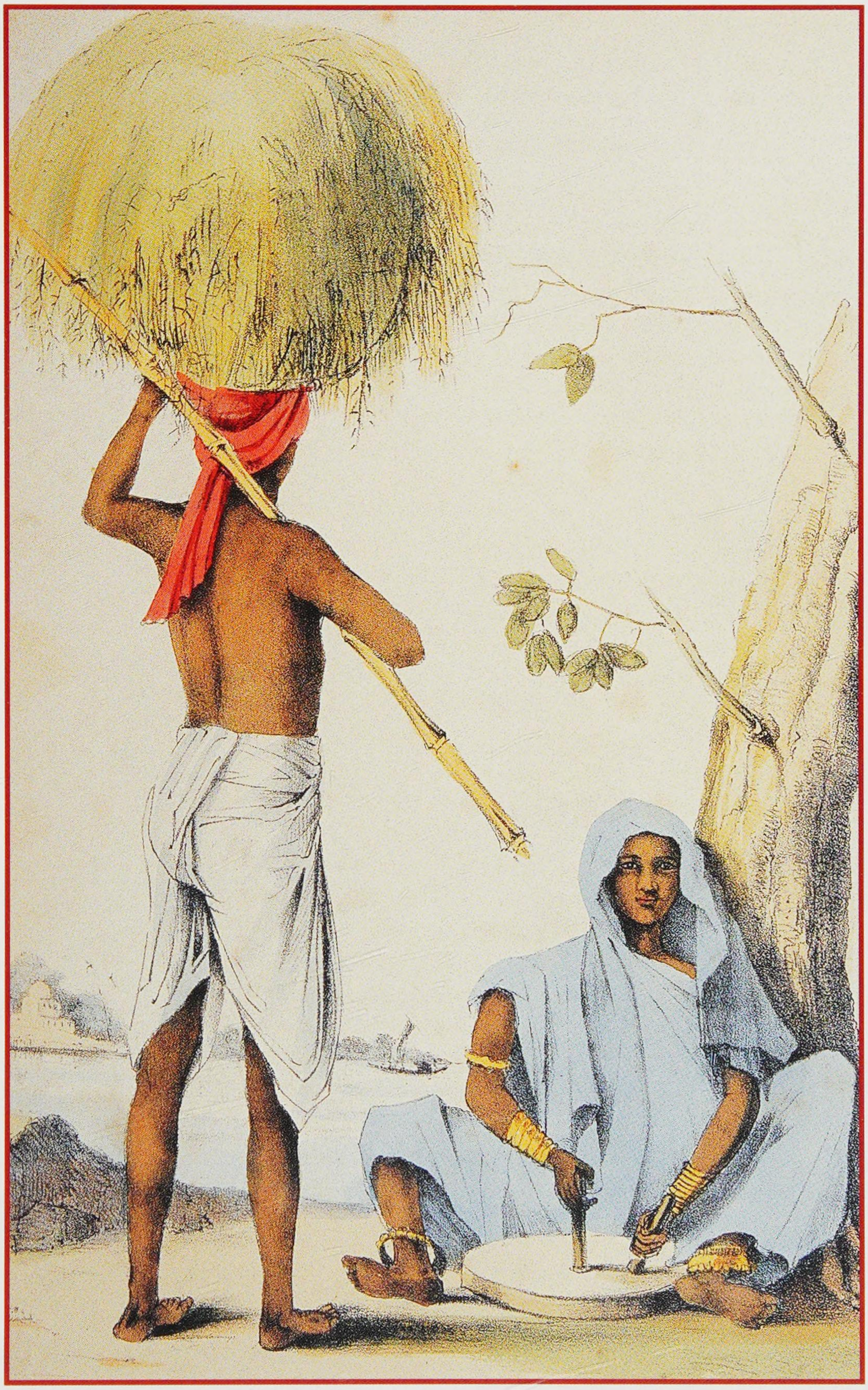
78 *Married couple of the first caste, Brahmin by F. B. Solvyns, Calcutta, c. 1790*
79 *Married couple of the second caste, Kshtriya by F. B. Solvyns, Calcutta, c. 1790*
80 *Married couple of the third caste, Vaishya by F. B. Solvyns, Calcutta, c. 1790*
81 *Married couple of the fourth caste, Shudra by F. B. Solvyns, Calcutta, c. 1790*

inclined to accept, she withdrew her veil, and displayed a face still decked with youthful bloom, delicate features and fine expression". The sight inspired the youngman to recite some romantic Persian verses which brought a smile on her face. But instantly, she assumed a dignified air and assured him in impressive language that the deep sense of her obligation had alone induced her to deviate from the established custom and seek this interview. She added that a sense of her own honour, veneration to her husband's memory, and maternal example to her children, would ever regulate her conduct. However, lest he should consider her ungrateful she fixed another meeting next evening. Encouraged by so flattering an invitation, the enamoured youth went to the mansion the next day at the appointed hour and was warmly received by a lady whom he took to be the mistress of the house. He was dazed when throwing off her veil he discovered another beautiful Mughal young woman, witty and elegant who entertained him while the widow and her children, were away from the house. He never afterwards discovered his lovely incognita, nor could he, consistent with propriety, continue his visits to the Mughal family.

Accounts of the hilly districts of North India record the practice of polyandry. In the course of his travels in the mountains, Capt. Skinner saw a village woman whom he regarded as the prettiest woman he had met in the East. But he noted that "their charms, however, are not properly appreciated by the Himalayan gallants, one wife being the property of a family of brothers; four seems to be the mystical number". Such a system was in a way a self-imposed curb on population originating in "cold and unproductive countries", where food for a family could be procured with difficulty. In South India also, polyandry was in vogue among some lower castes. In wealthy families, each man took a wife, but this being considered expensive, in poor families the brothers married one wife in common and, slept with her by turns. If either of the brothers became discontented he might marry another woman.

European observers emphasise that Indian wives enjoyed the complete confidence of their husbands; they were the guardians of family wealth and played a dominant role in all family affairs, ceremonies and festivities. According to Dubois, "they showed a shrewdness, a savingness and intelligence which would do honour to the best housewives of Europe".

82 *Femme de Brahmin (Brahmin's wife) by Jacques Charles Bar, c. 1770*



83 *A grass cutter and his wife by Fanny Parks, c. 1830*

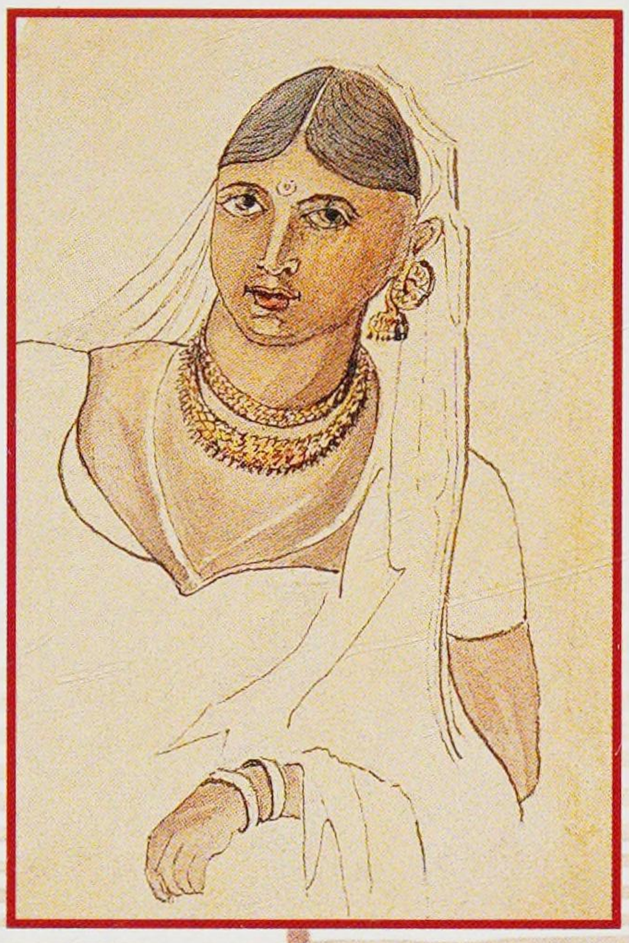
One woman author goes further and declares; "the men of India - poor souls! - the most henpecked in the world. They might make a brave show but the general form of Home Rule is feminine despotism veiled by a slavish subserviency in trivial details". Another woman writer, commenting on Indian family life, noted that the "Indian woman wields a strong influence over her husband, and has more of a place in the life around her than what the Europeans imagined from the stories they heard about the unhappy life "behind zenana bars". Some Europeans not acquainted with the Indian way of life, carried an erroneous impression that for Indian women, love devoid of sentiment, meant only sensuality and they were unaware of the refined and chaste endearments and intellectual enjoyment.

Most accounts highlight the fact that for a woman, sex outside marriage was almost inconceivable. Society had laid down severe standards and any sexual indiscretion entailed harsh punishment, including her excommunication and public degradation. It is recorded that in 1807, a young woman suspected of adultery, was subjected to a trial by ordeal with hot clarified butter in the presence of about 7000 spectators. Harry Verelst mentions in his journal (1772) another case in 1762, where a Bengali "detected one of his women in an act of infidelity", and he punished her by cutting off her nose. Cases are also cited where sons put to death their own mothers who, as young widows, fell to temptations of sex. Forbes felt deeply sorry for the young widows, who were forced into celibacy. He refers to cases when young widows on becoming pregnant often committed suicide and their bodies were found in the public wells of the city.

The laws of society, though very strict in this regard, did take into account the circumstances and the situations leading to infidelity. When it was found that the woman was coerced and forced to submit to the carnal desires of her abductor, she was treated differently. This is testified by an unusual story which has been repeated by quite a few authors in their journals. Perhaps the first one to relate it was John Grose in 1760. This is about a man of substance who lived happily with his exceedingly beautiful wife in a town on the banks of the Ganges. One morning, as she went to the river with a vessel to get water, a Mughal noble who happened to pass that way, caught

84 *Women floating lamps in the Ganges for the wellfare of their husbands by William Daniell, c. 1800*

sight of her. He was so captivated by her beauty and charm that he spurred his horse and forcibly carried her away, despite her protests and cries. No one knew anything about the abductor and where he had taken her. The husband was so overwhelmed with grief that he turned a wandering yogi to find some peace of mind as well as search for his beloved wife all over the country. On the other hand, the Mughal abductor kept her hidden in his mansion. However, after having two children from her, he gave her some freedom. One day as she stood at her garden door, her husband passing that way sought alms from her. She at once recognized him from his voice and narrated to him all her ordeals. She spoke of the innocence of her heart and told him she was determined to escape with him. But, taking into account the religious laws prohibiting her return to the Hindu caste, the husband hastened to consult the high priest at Puri, whether anything could be done to restore her to her religion. On return he told her that her excommunication could be nullified on such conditions which he could neither expect nor advise her to comply with. The first of them was that she should "destroy the children she had by her ravisher so as to leave no living monuments of her pollution by his profane embraces", then, go to Puri with her husband and there have melted lead poured down her throat, so that she might be admitted to die in her caste if she could not live in it. The wife, on hearing these terms, accepted them, in spite of all the dissuasions on the man's part. She managed to kill the children and presented herself with single-minded determination to the priests at the Puri temple, demanding the fulfilment of the second condition. Accordingly, she was led to the appointed place, where in the presence of a large number of people, "she appeared without the least symptom of fear at the dreadful apparatus of the fire, and the instruments of her suffering". After a short prayer, she was blindfolded, and made to lie on the ground with her mouth open, ready to receive her death with the melted lead. Instead, some cold water was poured into her mouth, and "she was asked to get up, and then assured, that the sincerity of her intention having thus been proved, was accepted by the Deity", and that she was at liberty to live with her husband as before, being now reinstated in all her rights, divine and social.



Dress, Ornaments and Cosmetics

85 *Above: Gunga, an Indian woman by J. B. Bellasis, c. 1820*

North Indian women went out of home properly covered and muffled up. In the South, however, they went about quite freely. On the Malabar coast, like men, they did not cover themselves above the waist. The garment that was characteristic of most of the Indian women was the sari. It was described as a simple web of cloth, so curiously arranged as to form, without the use of needle, thread, or scissors a petticoat, mantle and veil. Captain Mundy was greatly impressed by the sari and considered it "infinitely more graceful and even more decent than the evening costume of the belles of more sophisticated regions". Whether of brocade stiff with gold, silk or Dacca muslin, the sari was almost identical in its various forms; it was gracefully draped. An admirer of the sari, Captain Basil Hall, noted in his *Travels in India* :

"It is wound round the body and limbs with so much propriety that while the most scruplous delicacy could find nothing to censure on the score of deficiency in covering, it is arranged with such innate and judicious taste that even the eye of a sculptor could hardly wish any of its folds removed".

An alluring sight of young women clad in white saris on the river ghats of Calcutta inspired Thomas Twining, an English visitor to remark in his travelogue that "nothing could be more elegant and picturesque than the attitude and whole appearance of these delicate well-formed females, with their light white dress, consisting of one long piece of cloth, which descending from the head, encircled the waist, and fell in graceful folds nearly to the ankle, not straight but sloping, leaving one leg more exposed than the other".

According to early accounts, the sari by itself without any petticoat, blouse or undergarments was the dress of Hindu women in Bengal and Bihar. Though admired in many quarters, the missionaries and English-women in the early 19th century found the woman's dress unseemly, indecorous or even indecent. It was the puritanical and prudish sections of the British community, who introduced the idea of adding other items to conceal the body more effectively. So the educated Bengali upper classes tried to put their women in "civilized attire" by pushing them into a textile prison fashioned by male tailors and social reformers.

Another piece of garment that went with the sari was the tiny choli or jacket. It was close fitting, almost skin tight going over the shoulders.

86 *Native lady of Umritsar wearing a full set of jewellery from head to toe and gold embroidered costume by Van Smith, c. 1880*

87 *A Brahmin woman by William Carpenter, Madras, c. 1851*

It was tied with a cross-over string knotted between the shoulder blades. The cholis varied in different parts of the country and indicated the wearer's status. The common women had printed cotton in loud colours while the affluent preferred silks, embroidered muslins and clear nets in different shades.

In the North-west, women usually wore the *peshwaz*, a form of skirt made of cotton in a variety of colours. It was pleated and gathered into a band at the waist. It frequently measured from thirty to forty yards. Attractive trimmings of gold and silver lace and embroidery were added. The strings that tied it round the waist were made of netted silk with tassels at the end.

Mrs. Ali gives a detailed description of the apparel of upper class Muslim women of Lucknow. Her account is similar to that recorded by Rev. C. Buchanan (1807) for Bihar or Bengal. They wore pyjamas of rich satin, gold cloth or *gulbadan*, a fine silk fabric, with body like a rose. These were made very full round the waist and over the thighs but got closer and tighter as they reached the feet. The *zarband* or the silk-cord which held the pyjamas at the waist, had its ends terminating in rich tassels of gold and silver often "rendered magnificent with pearls and jewels". Their *ungeeah* (bodice) was of different materials such as of gauze, net or muslin, the more transparent in texture, the more agreeable to taste. Ornamented with spangles and silver trimmings, the *ungeeah* was made "to fit the bust with great exactness" and fastened behind with strong cotton cords. Their sleeves, which were short and tight, were invariably finished with some fanciful embroidery or silver riband. Over the *ungeeah* was worn a transparent *courtie* (shirt) of thread net which covered the waistband of the pyjamas but did not screen it.

The *dupatta* is mentioned as the most graceful part of the costume, "a useful envelope" made of Dacca muslins, "transparent and soft as the web of the gossamer spider", called *shubnum* (night dew) as also of coloured gauze. It was worn with much original taste on the back of the head, falling in graceful folds over the person, one end partially covering the figure, the other thrown over the opposite shoulder.

The main difference between the Hindu and Muslim women's dress was that the latter sported more actually sewn up costumes than the former. Traditionally, the Hindus were said to be against cut-out and

88 *Hindu women and a goldsmith by John Luard, c. 1830*

PERCY BRO

89 *Above: A Bengali lady wearing characteristic jewellery by Fredrick W. A. De Fabeck, c. 1860*
90 *Left: A woman of Chumba in the local costume by Percy Brown, c. 1920*

sewn garments. It was noted by Capt. Meadows Taylor, and some other British observers that before the Muslim rule in India, anything like a shaped coat or bodice was entirely unknown and the use of the needle in the making of wearing apparel was a Muslim contribution.

Ornaments had a special fascination for women of all classes. They were a woman's most precious possessions. For the Hindus, the use of jewellery had a religious significance prescribed by the sacred text, which says, "A wife being gaily adorned, her whole house is embellished, but if she be destitute of ornaments, all will be deprived of decoration". It was a common belief that, at least a speck of gold must be worn upon the person to ensure ceremonial purity. The reverence for gold was derived from the worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, supposed to dwell in gold. For this reason, wearing of gold on legs or feet was forbidden so as not to show disrespect to Lakshmi.

One of the earliest observations about ornaments is by Ralph Fitch, who travelled to India, in the late 16th century. He writes that women in Benaras decked their arms and legs with silver and copper rings or with hoops made of ivory, which were adorned, with amber stones or agates. Another traveller, John Grose (1760s), found Indian women loaded with jewels from head to toe, their necks adorned with necklaces, their arms with bracelets and their ankles with chains of gold and silver often embellished with precious stones.

The ornaments had an endless variety of patterns and designs. Captain Williamson, in his writings, describes them in detail. Another account of jewellery in the 18th century, mentions nearly eighty prominent ornaments for the head and forehead, sixteen for the ears, five for the nose, about thirty for the neck and a similar number of armlets, bracelets, rings for fingers, ornaments for waist, for ankles, toes, etc.

The use of ornaments was universal. The types differed with classes and communities. Each community had at least one particular jewel associated with a religious festival or a caste ceremony or belief. Many Muslim women used to wear charms and talismans studded with precious stones.

The quality, size and weight of jewellery depended on the status of a women. On social and religious occasions, jewels were displayed in a big way. According to James Forbes, a Hindu lady of distinction always seemed to be overloaded with finery. He wrote: "Their long black hair is adorned

91 *A seated Madras girl. Inscribed: Peru. by William Carpenter, c. 1851*

92 *Above: A Kulu woman with pot by A. F. P. Harcourt, c. 1860*
93 *Left: Munni, a sixteen year old Mehtrani of the sweeper caste from Lahore, by Rudolph swoboda, c. 1887*

with jewels, their ears are bored in many places and loaded with pearls; a variety of gold chains, strings of pearls, and precious stones fall from the neck over the bosom, and the arms are covered with bracelets from the wrist to the elbow; they have also gold and silver chains round the ankles and abundance of rings on their fingers and toes, among these on the fingers is frequently a small mirror". With regard to gems, they were valued for their magical virtues. The diamond and the *nava ratna* or nine gems were supposed to bring good fortune; these included, coral, topaz, sapphire, ruby, emerald, jacinth, zircon, carbuncle and diamond. It was believed that each one of them had a specific remedial role against the baleful influence of different planets.

We also come across some accounts concerning cosmetics and other beauty aids used by women. They were particularly known to be fastidious about personal appearance and as Mrs. Fay noted in her published letters "their whole time is taken up in decorating their persons. The hair, eyelids, eyebrows, teeth, hands and nails all undergo certain processes to render them more completely fascinating". Forbes, a keen observer, noticed how they used every method to render their persons delicate, soft and attractive. They perfumed their hair with oil of cloves, cinnamon, sandal and other sweet scented flowers. About women in South India, Dubois says that marks of yellow saffron adorned every visible part of their body while their eyelids were carefully beautified with antimony. Williamson writes about some women using a kind of pomade made of orange peels, ground fine upon a stone and mixed with flour made from peas called *besen*. This was really fragrant as well as cleansing.

Commenting on the artificial aids used by women to enhance their beauty, Daniel Johnson, in his account of the native customs, spells out the practical utility of these practices. As to colouring of the palms of their hands, soles of their feet and nails red with *mehandi* (henna), he explains that though considered an ornament, it was used to check the perspiration in hands and feet in the hot climate. On the use of *soorma* he points out that not only did it beautify the eyes by producing a contrast to the whites of their eyes but also helped in curing or preventing certain eye ailments. He found even the chewing of *pawn* (flavoured betel leaf) useful for the body as it acted as a stimulus to the digestion and sweetened the breath.

94 *Prayers in the Ganges- Indian girl standing in water, holding flowers by Egron Lundgren, c. 1858*

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